

Holmes of Kyoto

~The Case Files of
a Gion Detective~

12

Mai Mochizuki





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Kiyotaka Yagashira

Nicknamed “Holmes,” he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. He is currently undergoing training to learn about the outside world before taking over the antique store Kura.

Aoi Mashiro

A second-year university student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama and began working part-time at the antique store Kura. She is developing her potential as an appraiser under Kiyotaka’s guidance.





Akihito Kajiware

An up-and-coming young actor. He has good looks but also tends to be the comic relief.



Rikyu Takiyama

Kiyotaka's younger brother figure. He admires Kiyotaka so much that he used to be averse to Aoi, but...

Ensho

His real name is Shinya Sugawara. He is a former counterfeiter and Kiyotaka's archnemesis, but after a series of twists and turns, he is now studying as an apprentice of a famous appraiser.



Seiji Yagashira (Owner)

Kiyotaka's grandfather. He is a nationally certified appraiser and the owner of Kura.

Yoshie Takiyama

Rikyu's mother and the owner's girlfriend. She is a career woman who runs an art-related business and has a first-class architect license.



Takeshi Yagashira (Manager)

Kiyotaka's father. He is a popular writer of historical novels.



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Prologue

The ever-ticking grandfather clock in the antique store Kura made a different, clacking sound right before the minute hand reached the top. Immediately after, the bell tolled ten times. It was 10 a.m., and I, Aoi Mashiro, had just arrived at the store ten minutes prior. I had put on my apron as usual and was preparing to open the shop. I carefully removed the sheets covering the various items, dusted everything off, and began wiping down the counter. I glanced at the tabletop calendar sitting at the end of the counter and paused. It was still showing August.

“August is over now,” I mumbled, flipping the page.

Starting today, it was September. My university was still on summer break, but it seemed that the new semester had already begun at a lot of schools—the street was much less crowded than it had been yesterday. Today was also the first day of work for Kiyotaka “Holmes” Yagashira. His new job was at Komatsu Detective Agency, which was run by Katsuya Komatsu, a private detective we first met through one of his cases and were now friends with.

I couldn’t help but smile at the thought of Holmes finally becoming a real “Holmes of Kyoto Gion.” That was another thing—Komatsu’s office was in Gion, south of the Kiyamachi-Shijo intersection. Holmes had said that it was only a ten-minute walk from here, although at my pace, it could take an extra five. At any rate, it was close. Maybe that was why I didn’t feel lonely this time.

“I’m going to try to get off to a good start too,” I said, feeling motivated. There wasn’t much to do in the store, though, due to the lack of customers. My work boiled down to rearranging the display window and cleaning everything. Since there were so many antiques here, if they were even slightly dirty, the store would immediately feel cramped. Because of that, it was important to keep the place clean at all times. The floor was always shining, the window glass was practically invisible, and there wasn’t a speck of dust to be found. The job was simple, but it was also a lot of work. It would’ve been nice if my room at

home was also sparkling clean all the time, but unfortunately, I wasn't this meticulous in my personal life. Just last night, my mother had told me to clean my room.

Maybe I can only put so much effort into cleaning because it's my job. I wish I could be equally thorough at work and at home, but... As I was about to succumb to self-loathing, I suddenly remembered Holmes's room with its tall piles of books. *Even though he always seems so perfect, he's messy in private too.* That made me a little relieved.

"I wonder how he's doing right now?" Knowing him, he would be doing his work flawlessly no matter where he went. But this time, I was a bit worried because Ensho was accompanying him. The ex-counterfeiter was Holmes's archnemesis. Even after various issues were resolved and Ensho became Shigetoshi Yanagihara's apprentice, they still got along like oil and water. But despite being repulsed by the man, Holmes did acknowledge his ability. He seemed to believe that Ensho would become a brilliant appraiser now that he was studying under a famous appraiser like Yanagihara. But Ensho, in his impatience to catch up to Holmes, continued to stray off course. Holmes couldn't stand to see him like that, so he had negotiated directly with Yanagihara to let him take over for a while—which included Ensho accompanying Holmes on his training.

And so, Holmes and Ensho were both at Komatsu Detective Agency now. "Will Komatsu be okay?" I wondered aloud. I imagined the detective stuck between the two rivals and couldn't help but give a strained smile.

Chapter 1: The First Request

“I want to know who killed me,” the middle-aged man lounging on the leather sofa said with a smile.

Across from him, Katsuya Komatsu blinked in confusion. The man sitting in front of him was certainly no ghost. In fact, he was so lively that he looked younger than his real age, which was over fifty.

Just as Komatsu was about to ask again, thinking he’d misheard, Kiyotaka Yagashira, who was sitting next to him, smiled and asked, “Could you tell us more about the situation?”

Komatsu put his hand on his forehead. The first request to come in after Kiyotaka’s arrival was so bizarre that he couldn’t help but fear for the difficulties that lay ahead.

At any rate, the story began the day before...

1

South of Kiyamachi-Shijo was a small, quaint path along the Takase River. This was where Katsuya Komatsu’s office was located. Most of the traditional wooden townhouses here were restaurants, with the “Komatsu Detective Agency” sign being the only outlier. It didn’t detract from the scenery because it was wooden and written in brush strokes, but it still felt out of place.

The elderly couple who had previously lived in the townhouse were clients of his. In tears, they had asked him to find their son, who they had disowned decades prior. They had been afraid that they wouldn’t be able to see him again before they died, but Komatsu had solved the case splendidly and located him. After reconciling, the elderly couple moved in with their son. They were going to rent their townhouse out, but...

“We want someone we can trust, so we’d be glad to have you live here, Komatsu.”

Komatsu had happened to be looking for a new office, so he agreed to rent the place—but not as a residence. The exterior remained purely Japanese-style, but with the landlord's permission, the interior had been renovated. The first floor's tatami mats had been replaced with wooden flooring to turn it into an office and consultation room, complete with a sofa set and a desk. The second floor was his research room, equipped with the latest in computer technology.

Komatsu had mainly been working alone in this townhouse until now, but that would change starting today. A young man named Kiyotaka Yagashira, whom he had met by chance, would be working with him for a little while. He had a brilliant mind, an expert eye for appraisal, and observation skills so sharp you would think he was a mind reader. Appearance-wise, he was beautiful and stylish. His gentle smile made him seem harmless, but he occasionally looked like a devil in Komatsu's eyes, which was terrifying.

At first, Komatsu had been uncomfortable around him, but he'd gotten used to his quirks. Kiyotaka Yagashira was a calm and intellectual man as long as you didn't harm him...or his girlfriend. Anyway, the point was that he was a good, sensible person who was great at getting work done. He would only be working at the detective agency for a short time, but Komatsu was looking forward to it...until *they* actually arrived.

*

Save me from this hell, Katsuya Komatsu cried out in his heart as he sat at his office desk.

"So, starting today, you will be studying under me," Kiyotaka said to Ensho. "I'm working for Komatsu's detective agency right now, and you will accompany me."

Ensho—whose real name was apparently Shinya Sugawara—was a young man in a casual dark brown kimono. What stood out the most about him was his bald head, which made him look like a monk. He had a rather masculine face and seemed well built, perhaps because of his broad shoulders. He was slightly taller than Kiyotaka and looked to be around thirty years old.

Ensho plopped himself down on the sofa, snorted, and looked up at the standing Kiyotaka. "What's this outta nowhere? I only came here 'cause

Yanagihara told me to. And what do you mean, ‘under’ you? Does that make you my teacher now? I never agreed to that.”

“Did Yanagihara not tell you anything?”

“All he did was tell me to go to you and give me this place’s address. Hey, is this some kind of harassment?”

“It is not. You’re too conscious of me when you’re with Yanagihara, and it’s making you rash. I thought it’d be better for you to just stay with me for a while in that case.”

“How self-centered do you have to be to think that I’m conscious of you?”

Kiyotaka smirked at the glaring man. “The way you get worked up like that is proof that I’m right.”

“What did you just say?”

Ahhhhh! Komatsu slouched over the desk, holding his head in his hands. Make it stop! What’s with this brutal atmosphere? Doesn’t this guy know how scary the kid is? Stop doing this in my office! I never signed up for this—well, yes, I did.

Kiyotaka had told him in advance that he wanted to bring a temporary apprentice named Ensho with him, and Komatsu had replied, “No problem.” The reason was that payment was based on work done and not a fixed salary. So Kiyotaka could bring as many people as he wanted, and they could even study antiques in the office during their free time. Komatsu had approved it with a smile, but he hadn’t expected it to be so tense.

No one said anything about this. He fearfully looked at Kiyotaka, who was still all smiles, and looked back down in terror.

“Hey,” Ensho said in a mocking tone, seeming to have regained his composure, “if you’re my teacher, does that make me your second apprentice after Aoi?”

“Aoi said the same thing—that she was my best apprentice and you were number two. I don’t consider myself her teacher right now, though.”

“Does that mean you’ll do naughty things to me too? You guys are *always*

doing dirty stuff after hours when the store curtains are closed, aren't ya?" Ensho asked as if purposely trying to anger Kiyotaka.

Komatsu turned pale at the thought of a fight breaking out, but Kiyotaka simply chuckled and smiled. "Now, now, it's not *always*. Very occasionally, we flirt a little. That's all."

Ensho clicked his tongue, let down by the calm reaction.

Kiyotaka fell silent for a few moments before sighing and saying, "Very well."

"Huh?" Ensho looked up with a frown.

"It appears that I was too hasty in my decision. I am very sorry. Please return to Yanagihara, and thank you for coming all the way here." Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and bowed. Then he motioned towards the door as if to say, "The exit is that way."

Ensho clammed up. He wanted to snap at Kiyotaka some more, so it was disappointing that he'd backed down so easily. Plus, he didn't know how to react to being told to go home so quickly. For a second, he looked lost and confused like a scolded child. After a few moments of silence, he looked away and muttered, "My teacher ordered me to go to you, so I ain't going back."

"I see. In that case, I look forward to working with you."

Ensho remained facing away and said nothing. He didn't even try to look at the hand that Kiyotaka extended to him.

This guy isn't young at all. Why's he so immature? Komatsu wondered. He leaned back in his chair, exasperated but relieved that the explosive situation had passed. *Anyway, I need to get to work.* He reached for the computer mouse. There weren't any requests, but the administrative work had piled up. He opened the account and was immediately greeted by red numbers. Depressed, he slumped and put a hand on his forehead.

For a while, he had been praised as the detective who exposed the cannabis cult—although the case had actually been solved by Kiyotaka—and work had been coming in nonstop. He couldn't handle it all by himself and had been suffering from success when he heard that Kiyotaka was soliciting training positions and threw his hat into the ring. However, that was in the past, and the

bubble had now burst. It was as if those dazzling days had never existed. Work had dried up and he could barely afford to pay the monthly rent. The red numbers on the balance sheet were a more serious issue than the discord between Kiyotaka and Ensho. He was surviving thanks to the money he made during the short bubble period, but it was only a matter of time. It would be wise to move to an area with cheaper rent.

Why is the rent so damn high here? Komatsu hung his head.

Noticing the detective's plight, Kiyotaka said, "Well then, let's get to work. It's the perfect time." According to the clock on the wall, it was 2 p.m.

Komatsu's head jerked up. "Uh, but there's no work for you to do. Not that it's something to be proud of." He gave an awkward laugh.

"Work doesn't just fall into your lap. If you don't sow any seeds, flowers won't bloom. I think it's necessary to start with the tried-and-true methods, so I'm going to hand out flyers." Kiyotaka opened the desk drawer and took out a stack of flyers. They were the ones Komatsu had made when he first opened for business that said "Komatsu Detective Agency — Are you in trouble? We can help with anything," along with a note that the agency was skilled with internet matters.

"Eh," Komatsu said in a low voice, placing his hand on his forehead. "I don't think it'll help. I put a lot of effort into handing them out when I first opened, but no one took them. When people saw me putting them in their mailboxes, they smiled cynically and went, 'Why, thank you, but we don't need it.' It was really scary." He sighed with a pitiful look on his face.

"Well, I suppose it would be difficult to distribute flyers for a detective agency around here. I know some people, though, so I'll try going to them."

Ensho stretched languidly and said, "I'll hand 'em out to random people too, then. That's good enough, yeah?"

"No." Kiyotaka shook his head. "You come with me. It'll be a good opportunity to introduce you to the people I know in this area. Meeting new people is very valuable."

"Oh," Ensho replied unenthusiastically.

Komatsu chuckled at the man's defiant yet obedient reaction.

"We'll be going now, Komatsu," said Kiyotaka, putting the flyers into a tote bag.

"Ah," Komatsu said, holding up a hand at the pair who were about to leave. "W-Wait, I'll come too. Introduce those people to me too!" He leaped up and prepared to head out.

2

After leaving the office, the three crossed the Kamo River via a small bridge called Donguri Bridge and headed north on Kawahata Street. This area was called Gion Kobu. It was home to famous shrines and temples such as Rokuharamitsu-ji Temple, Kyoto Ebisu Shrine, Kennin-ji Temple, and Yasui Konpiragu Temple. It was also known for the charming scenery along Hanamikoji Street.

Komatsu nodded happily as he walked. "This place has *the* Gion feel to it, doesn't it? Kyoto really is special. You can't help but admire everything."

Kiyotaka looked surprised. "I didn't expect you to talk about Kyoto that way."

"Nah, I've always liked Kyoto, but in a trend-following kinda way. Gion's elegance in particular makes you forget all the commotion of modern life."

Ensho glanced coldly at Komatsu. "Sure, but take one step into the back streets and that's what you get." He pointed at a row of shops offering sexual services.

As Komatsu said, Gion Kobu was an elegant, glamorous district with traditional Kyoto flair, but the back streets were littered with sex establishments and love hotels with generic modern store names that could be found anywhere in Japan.

"Huh?" Komatsu stopped in place with a disappointed look on his face.

"What, you don't know anything about this area? Didn't you set up an office here?"

"I'm mainly a desk-work detective, so..." Even back when he had handed out

flyers, he had lost heart quickly and given up.

“A desk-work detective?” Ensho shrugged and chuckled as he looked at the sex parlor signs. “A lot of these shops really are completely normal. You’d think they’d push for a more traditional style if they’re gonna operate in Kyoto.”

“I agree, but they’re probably trying not to attract tourists,” said Kiyotaka.

“Hmm.” Ensho nodded. “They’re expecting locals and visiting businessmen to go in on a whim, so they don’t need the aesthetic.”

“Yes, and people may even avoid places that look expensive.”

“Safer to go with a generic shop, eh?”

“It could be the case.”

“As a Kyoto local, did you used to go to places like this?”

“I did not.”

“Hey, can we stop talking about this stuff on such a classy street?” asked Komatsu, his face twitching.

“Good point,” Kiyotaka said with a laugh. “I’m going to do a little shopping over there before making the rounds.” He looked at the Toraya near Minamiza Theater.

“You like yokan, kiddo?” Komatsu asked. Yokan were jellied desserts made of red bean paste, agar, and sugar.

“I do, but I’m not going to eat them myself. Please wait here.” Kiyotaka went into the store.

“He’s gonna give ’em out,” Ensho mumbled.

“Oh, to the people we’re meeting.” Komatsu put a hand on his head. “Which means it’s a business expense and the company has to pay...”

After a while of Komatsu’s muttering, Kiyotaka came out with several boxes’ worth of sweets.

“Y-You sure bought a lot. Weren’t they expensive?” Komatsu feared for his wallet.

“Yes, they cost a fair bit, but don’t worry. This is my way of thanking you for all of the help you’ve been. Oh, but sorry, please help me carry them.” He handed the many paper bags to Komatsu and Ensho.

“What a generous rich kid,” Ensho said mockingly.

“It’s not out of generosity. As I said earlier, it’s sowing the seeds. An upfront investment,” Kiyotaka replied smoothly.

They turned back south and took a small path that led to a quiet street lined with wooden townhouses. In front of their sliding doors were small nameplates and round red paper lanterns.

“Geisha houses,” Ensho remarked.

“Huh,” Komatsu murmured.

Kiyotaka, who had been walking briskly, stopped in front of a townhouse with no nameplate. “The person who lives here knows a lot about this area.”

“Is this a geisha house too?” asked Komatsu.

“No. It used to be, but the owner has retired.”

Komatsu gulped as Kiyotaka rang the bell. After a little while, the door slowly slid open and an elegant-looking old woman in a kimono appeared.

“Who is it?” she asked. For a second, she looked suspicious of the three men in front of her house, but as soon as she saw Kiyotaka, a smile blossomed on her face. “Why, long time no see, Kiyotaka, dear.”

“Yes, it has been quite a while, Kazuyo.”

“Has Seiji been well?”

“Yes, he’s the same as always.”

Komatsu watched their cheerful conversation and murmured, “Kyoto’s relationship map is seriously insane.”

“Uh-huh.” Ensho shrugged.

“So what brings you here today?” asked Kazuyo.

“I actually finished grad school recently,” Kiyotaka began.

“Oh, you aren’t a student anymore?”

“That is correct.”

“You still look like one to me, though. Are you finally going to take over the store?”

“That was the plan, but my grandfather told me to work at various places to expand my knowledge of the world.” Kiyotaka gave an exasperated shrug.

Kazuyo giggled. “That does sound like something Seiji would do.”

“So right now, I’m working for Detective Komatsu, and his office is nearby,” Kiyotaka said, looking at Komatsu.

The detective hurriedly bowed and said, “Nice to meet you. I’m Katsuya Komatsu. I run a detective agency near here.”

“And the man next to him is named Ensho,” Kiyotaka continued. “He’s an appraiser-in-training like me, and he’s studying under Yanagihara. We happen to both be working for Komatsu right now.”

Ensho put on his signature fake smile. “Pleasure to meet you,” he said with a slight bow.

“Oh my.” Kazuyo placed a hand over her mouth. “A detective agency with two apprentice appraisers? That’s rather unusual.”

“Isn’t it?” Kiyotaka laughed and held out a flyer. “If you run into any trouble in the future, feel free to contact us. Oh, and I brought the yokan that you like.” He took out one of the boxes.

The old woman smiled happily and said, “Why, thank you. I’d never say no to Toraya.”

“I’m glad you like it. By the way, has there been any trouble in this area recently?”

“Hmm...” Kazuyo tilted her head. “A volunteer group was formed to keep the peace in the neighborhood. They’re called the Gion Peace Society, and they’ve been solving the minor issues themselves. But since you came to visit and brought Toraya with you, I’ll ask around. They just need to call this number, right?” She looked down at the phone number on the flyer.

“Yes, we would appreciate that very much.”

The three men thanked Kazuyo and walked off.

“She was happy about the Toraya, huh?” Komatsu mumbled to himself.

“Yes,” Kiyotaka said with a nod. “Toraya is a guaranteed winner.”

“But it’s from Tokyo,” Ensho quipped.

“Now that you mention it, yeah,” Komatsu murmured.

“No, Toraya was founded in Kyoto in the Muromachi period. According to one theory, when the Imperial House was moved to Tokyo after the Meiji Restoration, Toraya moved their headquarters there as well.”

“Huh. Does that mean if the Imperial House moves back here, Toraya will move their HQ back too?”

“Yes, it’s quite possible.” Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and smiled.

“Knowing you, I bet you think, ‘We’re just leaving the capital in Tokyo’s hands for now,’ eh?” Ensho said, sounding mildly exasperated.

“That’s a foolish question.”

“Foolish?”

“Anyway, let’s continue making the rounds. Oh, yes, there’s a Japanese goods store called Sakura-an near Tatsumi Inari. The proprietress there knows a lot about this area too, so let’s go say hello to her.”

“Roger,” said Komatsu. Ensho gave a languid sigh.

Keeping up the pace, they went around handing out flyers at various restaurants and geisha houses. All of them responded positively.

“This is way different from when I handed them out by myself,” Komatsu muttered, frustrated. “You’re amazing, kiddo.”

“It’s the power of the Yagashira family, not Mr. Holmes,” Ensho replied immediately.

“Don’t say that.” Komatsu gave a strained smile.

Kiyotaka didn’t seem to mind, though. He nodded and said, “Yes, these

connections were formed by my grandfather and his teacher. I hope to be able to inherit them well.”

He spoke casually, but Komatsu felt the weight of his words. Each and every one of these connections was part of Kyoto’s history and rooted in its culture.

“Next, we’ll go to the neighborhood association, followed by the historical societies, shrines, and temples.” Kiyotaka smiled and began walking at a brisk pace.

“He really is amazing,” Komatsu murmured. Ensho said nothing.

3

After finishing their greetings to some extent, the three returned to the office for a break.

“All we did was hand out flyers, but it feels like we got a lot of work done,” Komatsu said, stretching at his desk.

Kiyotaka placed a freshly brewed cup of coffee in front of him and nodded. “Yes, we walked quite a bit.”

As they were talking, Ensho sat slumped on the sofa with an apathetic look on his face.

“What are you making that face for?” Kiyotaka asked in exasperation as he served Ensho his coffee.

“I agreed to go with you ’cause of Yanagihara, but why do I have to work as a detective and hand out flyers? Ain’t I supposed to help you with appraising work?” He crossed his arms like a rebellious boy.

“I introduced you to many people today, did I not?”

“That’s different.”

“Is it?”

The friction between them made Komatsu begin to worry again. He drank his coffee to avoid looking at them.

“Now then, since it’s break time, shall we do a little studying?” asked

Kiyotaka, prompting a slight reaction from Ensho. “Do you mind, Komatsu?”

Komatsu nodded emphatically. “Go ahead. You can do whatever you want when there’s no work,” he said with a grin. He didn’t even mind if they left the office.

“Thank you.” Kiyotaka smiled and took a clear folder from his bag. It seemed to contain photographs. “Now then, please look at this.” He took the pictures out and laid them across the table.

“Hah,” Ensho snorted. “I was wondering what you were gonna do, but appraising from pictures? What’s the point? You won’t know anything without seeing the real thing.” He made a shooing motion with his hand, not bothering to look.

“Correct; nothing is better than seeing the real thing. But there is still plenty of information we can garner from photographs.”

“You’re always talking about the aura or whatever that genuine works give off. How are you gonna tell from a picture?”

“For now, could you look at the pictures before saying that?”

“You’ll teach cute little Aoi thoroughly with real things, but all I get is a bunch of photos? Where’s the equality?”

Kiyotaka put his hands on his hips and sighed. “What is with this attitude of yours?”

“I don’t recognize you as my teacher, so I don’t care how I act.” Ensho rested his chin on his hand and looked away.

Ahhhhh! Stop fighting! Komatsu hung his head. He was scared that Kiyotaka might run out of patience, but the young man’s face and demeanor were still relaxed. He was impressed by his tolerance level.

“I understand that you want to learn by seeing the real thing, but it would take effort to bring antiques to the office,” Kiyotaka continued as if reprimanding a child. “I prepared these photos so that you could study during your downtime.”

“If you can’t bring ’em here, then you can just teach me at Kura. Komatsu

even said we can do whatever we want when there's no work. Right?" Ensho looked at Komatsu, who was sitting at his desk.

"Ha ha ha..." Komatsu's face stiffened. "Yeah, I'm not paying you a fixed salary anyway, so you really can do whatever you want as long as there's no work."

"See, the boss himself said so. Let's go to Kura." Ensho turned to look back at Kiyotaka.

"Yeah, go right ahead." Komatsu glanced at Kiyotaka and immediately flinched. The young man's expression had turned alarmingly cold.

"Why do you want to go to Kura so badly?" Kiyotaka asked.

"Huh?" Ensho recoiled slightly, seeming overwhelmed as well. "W-Well, there's a ton of national-treasure-level antiques there. If you're gonna teach me, you might as well do it there instead of with pictures."

"Again with that nonsense of yours. You simply wish to see Aoi, do you not?" When Kiyotaka's emotions flared up, he automatically switched to his Kyoto accent. This was a prime example, with intensity seeping from every word he spoke.

He didn't get angry at any of Ensho's rude remarks until now. He really is ridiculously immature when it comes to his girlfriend! Komatsu held his head in his hands, unable to do anything about the brewing storm.

However, Ensho simply said quietly, "Oh, Aoi's at the shop today? I thought summer break was over and she'd be back at university by now. Yeah, we can't go to Kura, then." He looked away.

Surprised by his reaction, Kiyotaka looked dumbfounded. Komatsu stared blankly at Ensho too. *Looks like he doesn't wanna see Aoi. But why?* He tilted his head.

Just then, Kiyotaka's phone rang. "Excuse me," he said, taking it out of his pocket and looking at the screen. He grimaced for a second before answering the call with a calm "Hello?"

"Kiyotaka, I thought you've just been playing detective all this time, but now

you really are working as one in Gion?” came the voice of a woman with a Kyoto accent. It was so loud that Komatsu and Ensho could hear her too. They blinked in confusion.

“Yes, I’m currently working at a detective agency in Gion, but only temporarily.”

“And you’ve been visiting a bunch of people?”

“Yes.”

“So why didn’t you visit me? I know a lot of people too, so I can help.”

“Yes, I know.” Kiyotaka’s expression softened.

Based on the woman’s voice and tone, she seemed rather up there in years. *Who could that be?* Komatsu frowned in suspicion.

“A missus he has at his beck and call?” Ensho whispered.

“What?” Komatsu’s face stiffened, but at the same time, he realized it was plausible. It was said that succeeding in the art world required cozying up to rich ladies.

“So, I went and found you a job right away,” the woman on the phone bragged.

“Huh?” Kiyotaka’s eyes widened in confusion. “What kind of job?”

“A detective job, of course. I know someone who’s been dealing with a problem for a long time now. Could you call him and talk to him? He’s a good man who runs various businesses.”

“Is he a friend of yours?”

“Yes. He’s also a member of the Gion Peace Society, which was recently formed to protect the local peace. I’ve already talked to him, so would you mind taking down his name and address?”

“Sure.”

The name Koichi Takatsuji and an address in Higashiyama leaked out from the phone. Komatsu quickly turned to his computer screen and tapped away at the keyboard.

Koichi Takatsuji, fifty-three years old. As the lady said, he was the third-generation owner of several businesses based in Kyoto. Komatsu checked his publicly known assets and gulped. *A millionaire, huh? Now that's a job from a rich lady. Actually, I guess I should be impressed by that kiddo instead.*

"Well, I've done my part," the lady said gently.

"Thank you so much, grandma," Kiyotaka said with a smile, ending the call. Komatsu and Ensho choked. Kiyotaka looked at them and frowned. "What on earth is the matter?"

"D-Did you say 'grandma'?"

"Yes, that was my grandmother."

Komatsu and Ensho unconsciously exchanged glances.

Come to think of it, Seiji Yagashira got divorced a long time ago, Komatsu recalled. *That must've been his ex-wife.* "She complained that you didn't visit her, right?"

"Yes." Kiyotaka slumped his shoulders. "She lives in Gion. I did think I should go visit her, but it's kind of embarrassing to introduce people to a relative."

Embarrassing? Are you a little kid? Komatsu laughed.

"Your granny helps you find work? You really are a spoiled rich kid." Ensho smiled with his eyes, hiding his mouth with a paper fan he took out from his kimono sash.

Here we go again...

"Indeed, I am." Kiyotaka smiled, unfazed by Ensho's prickly words. He really didn't anger easily as long as his girlfriend wasn't involved. "My grandmother said that she spoke to the man already, so I'll give him a call." Phone in hand, he went to leave the room.

"Yeah, this is the first job that's come our way since you got here. I'm counting on you, kiddo."

As Komatsu watched Kiyotaka leave, the office phone rang. Straightening up, he picked up the receiver and said, "Hello, you've reached Komatsu Detective Agency."

“Hello, thank you for earlier. This is Kazuyo. Are you the person in charge?”

“Yes,” said the detective, bowing instinctively. “I’m Komatsu.”

“After you left, I talked to some people and found someone who wants to consult with you. I know it’s sudden, but would you be able to come over right now?”

“Y-Yes, we’ll be right there!” Komatsu hurriedly stood up.

4

It was evening when they returned to the geisha district, and the atmosphere had changed dramatically from earlier in the day. It still had its quaint charm, but the lit lanterns at the townhouse entrances and the short bamboo fences under them gave the place a mysterious, enchanting feel.

As Komatsu walked down the street, taking in the atmosphere, Ensho said, “Gion’s like a completely different place at night,” clearly thinking the same thing.

“Yes, that’s part of the neighborhood’s charm,” Kiyotaka agreed.

“This two-facedness is just like you,” Ensho quipped.

“Thank you. It’s an honor to be compared to Gion.”

Komatsu facepalmed as their battle of sarcasm-with-a-smile unfolded. Thinking about it, he’d been facepalming all day long. He looked down as he walked, and before he knew it, they’d reached Kazuyo’s house.

“We’re here, Komatsu,” said Kiyotaka.

The detective broke out of his stupor and turned around. “O-Oh.”

They rang the bell, and after a short wait, the door slid open and Kazuyo appeared. She smiled upon seeing the men and said, “Thank you for coming. Here, come on in.”

The three bowed and stepped inside the house.

The Japanese-style guest room they were taken to was occupied by a woman

in a kimono who looked to be around sixty, a geiko—a Kyoto geisha—in her midtwenties with her hair neatly tied up, and a maiko—an apprentice geisha—in her teens. The three of them were sitting side by side. They placed their hands on the tatami floor and bowed to Komatsu's group.

The eldest woman introduced herself as Ayako, the proprietress of a geisha house with the same name. The geiko was named Ichiko and the maiko was named Momoko. These were geisha names, not their real ones.

"This is Komatsu, a detective in Gion," Kazuyo began. "And the ones next to him are—"

"Kiyotaka, right? Long time no see," Ayako said with a giggle.

Ichiko and Momoko smiled politely, not seeming to recognize him.

"He's Seiji's grandson," Ayako added.

"Oh!" Their faces lit up.

"Yagashira's..."

"You are as handsome as the rumors say."

"Not at all," Kiyotaka said, shaking his head.

"Yes, yes," Ayako continued cheerfully, "the grandson who Seiji said gets rejected surprisingly often despite his looks."

"Oh, stop that, mama." Momoko and Ichiko laughed.

"My grandfather said that?" Kiyotaka slumped his shoulders.

Next to him, Ensho chuckled and said, "Maybe you'll get dumped again, then," sounding genuinely amused.

Komatsu wanted to laugh along with them, but he retracted his smile upon seeing the terrifyingly dark look Kiyotaka gave Ensho.

After Ensho's introduction, Komatsu cleared his throat and looked at Kazuyo and Ayako. "So, what did you want to consult with me about?"

Ayako glanced at the other two women and said, "These are two of our most important geisha, and they always entertain guests together."

“They’re two of the most popular in Gion,” Kazuyo added.

Ichiko was a graceful beauty, while Momoko was very sweet. Both of them were pretty, so their popularity was understandable.

“Someone has been following Momoko around lately,” Ayako said hesitantly, placing a hand on her forehead.

“Could you be more specific?” Kiyotaka asked.

Ichiko and Momoko looked at each other.

“’Tis always when I am leaving the room,” said Momoko. “I suddenly realize that I am being followed.”

“Do they take pictures of you?”

“Yes, they did. ’Tis not unusual for people to take pictures of us, however. But that person is scary.” Momoko looked down at her lap.

Komatsu nodded. *The maiko has a stalker, huh?*

Kiyotaka continued his line of questioning. “When did you first sense that you were being followed?”

“I have been in training for a long time. Three months ago, I debuted as a maiko. It was a little while after that...”

“Yes,” Ichiko confirmed. “At first, I thought a man simply fell in love with her at first sight and was trying to pursue her.”

“Was that not the case?”

“Maiko are objects of admiration, so I tried not to worry about it,” said Momoko. “He was not following me every time, after all. But the other day, when I was with Ichiko, I noticed him there...and made up my mind to approach him. Then I found that he was muttering, ‘I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you.’ I was so scared.” Trembling, she clenched her fists in her lap.

Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho tensed at that.

“What did he look like?” Ensho asked softly. It was the first thing he’d said throughout the entire conversation, so Kiyotaka looked at him in surprise.

Momoko gazed up at the ceiling and tried to remember. “He had a medium

build and was always wearing a hat, mask, glasses, and dark clothing.”

“Yes, and I believe he had money,” added Ichiko. “He may have been a customer.”

“What makes you think that?” asked Kiyotaka.

“He was wearing good shoes,” Ichiko replied confidently.

“Good shoes...”

“Yes. Mama often said that if one wished to know about a person, one needed only look at their feet—specifically their shoes.”

“That’s wonderful,” Kiyotaka said with a smile.

Komatsu winced and thought, *Crap, my shoes are all scruffy*. Meanwhile, Ensho simply looked at Ichiko in silence.

“By the way, Momoko, has anyone ever stalked or had a grudge against you before this?” asked Kiyotaka.

Momoko thought for a bit and shook her head.

“I’m not a customer, so please answer honestly: have you ever broken up with someone who would have taken it badly? Or were there any customers where you unintentionally got their hopes up only to have to turn them down?”

“No, I have never had a boyfriend, nor have I ever been particularly close with any man. I have not been a maiko for long either, so I have not yet become close enough to any customer that they might expect something more.”

Kiyotaka nodded quietly. He didn’t sense any lies in her words. “Why did you become a maiko, Momoko?”

She blushed slightly. “’Tis embarrassing, but in the past, I came to Kyoto as a tourist and was able to dress up as a maiko as a hands-on experience. Many people turned to look when they passed by me, and it made me think, ‘I want to be a real maiko, not a fake.’”

“Were your parents opposed to it?”

“At first, yes. They said it was not an easy path, but I refused to yield, and finally, they accepted it. Now they are supportive of my choice. They even came

to celebrate on the day of my debut.”

“That’s good.” Kiyotaka smiled. “Now then, I’d like to ask Ichiko some questions too.”

Ichiko blinked in surprise. “Me?”

“Yes, because it’s possible the stalker was following you, not Momoko. If that were the case, can you think of any suspects?”

The geiko tilted her head, puzzled. “Since our work entails entertaining gentlemen over drinks, ’tis possible that someone may have developed feelings without my knowing. However, I do not think I have done anything that would invite a grudge.”

“Why did you enter this line of work, Ichiko?”

“My mother was a geiko in Gion. When I saw her old photographs, I wanted to become like her...but she knew firsthand how difficult this world was, so she objected with all her might. My father also loved me dearly, so he could not accept it either. In the end, I was essentially disowned.”

“Usually when an apprentice makes her debut, her parents will come to celebrate. However, when Ichiko did, none of her relatives came,” Momoko said sadly.

“’Tis fine,” Ichiko said with a laugh. “My mother said that if I became a geiko, she would break ties with me, so I was prepared for that outcome. My father called me on the phone in tears, though.”

“Where are your parents now?” Kiyotaka asked.

“My mother’s family has been running a hot spring inn in Oita for generations. She is currently the proprietress there, and my father is the chef.”

“I see. Will you be working tonight?”

“Not tonight.”

“We shall be tomorrow, though,” Momoko added.

Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho exchanged looks and nodded.

“Understood,” said Kiyotaka. “Tomorrow, when you are leaving, we will

secretly follow you and investigate the stalker. If possible, we will seize him and question him.”

“You have my sincere thanks,” Momoko said with a bow. She seemed truly relieved.

With the tension in the room gone, the three men stood up to leave.

“Oh, I just remembered,” said Ayako, raising a hand. Everyone turned to look at her and she gave an awkward shrug. “This is just something to keep in mind when walking around town, but...a strange rumor has been going around Gion lately.”

Momoko’s and Ichiko’s smiles turned into tense expressions.

“What kind of rumor?” asked Kiyotaka.

“They say...there’s a ghost,” Ayako said with a strained smile, placing a hand on her cheek.

“Oh, yes.” Kazuyo nodded. “The topic came up at the Gion Peace Society too. Everyone said they didn’t believe it, though.”

“I don’t believe it either,” said Ayako.

“A ghost...”

The word was so unexpected that Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho inadvertently exchanged looks.

5

The next day, Kiyotaka was heading down Kiyamachi-Shijo to get to work. Komatsu Detective Agency started its day late, at 1 p.m. Considering the special circumstances of working as a detective in Gion, it was probably an apt start time. Just as he had done yesterday, Kiyotaka opened the sliding door thirty minutes early, at 12:30 p.m.

“Hello,” he said, stepping inside, only to be surprised by what he saw—Ensho was already standing in the office, dressed casually in a T-shirt, jeans, and hat. What was even more surprising was the sight of Komatsu cowering at the man’s

feet.

“Ensho? Komatsu?” Kiyotaka stared blankly at the two men. If the one on the floor had been Aoi, he would have immediately grabbed Ensho by the collar and interrogated him. But since it was Komatsu, his head was cool. At first glance, it seemed like Ensho might have done something to Komatsu, but that wasn’t the case. He knew because Ensho was still wearing his hat and Komatsu had a blanket draped over his head. That was proof that Ensho had just arrived at the office and hadn’t done anything to the detective.

“I have no clue. He was like this when I got here,” Ensho said, turning around. “What the heck?” He shrugged.

“Komatsu, what happened?” Kiyotaka walked up to them.

The detective slowly looked up. There were bags under his eyes, and his face was pale.

“Are you all right?”

Komatsu opened and closed his mouth.

“Huh?” Kiyotaka and Ensho were both confused.

“I saw it...”

“What did you see?”

“What, old man? Didja catch your wife cheating on you?” said Ensho.

“Oh, that would indeed be depressing,” Kiyotaka noted.

“Might happen to you one day too.”

“If it does, I’m going to torture the other man in the worst way imaginable.”

“Scary. Komatsu, don’t be like him.”

“That’s not it!” Komatsu exclaimed.

“What ain’t it?”

“I-I saw it. There really was a ghost,” the detective said, trembling.

Kiyotaka and Ensho looked at each other.

“Well, let’s hear what he has to say first,” Ensho said, pulling the blanket off

Komatsu's head and sitting him down on the sofa. Meanwhile, Kiyotaka made coffee. The two of them sat down across from the detective.

"Last night, after you guys left, I wandered around Gion for a while, just patrolling the town. Nothing was going on, so I came back to the office," Komatsu mumbled, not looking up.

Kiyotaka and Ensho, sitting next to each other, listened to his story.

"I did some accounting stuff for a while, and then I looked into Takatsuji, who we were gonna talk to today. Suddenly I remembered that ghosts are supposed to appear in the dead of night."

"What a cliché," Ensho muttered.

"Well, that *is* what people say." Kiyotaka nodded.

"I checked the time and it was past 1 a.m., so I decided to go out on patrol again. I was going around Gion Kobu when I saw two geiko leaving a teahouse. They were going back to their geisha house after work. I followed them just to make sure they were safe, and I kept my distance so they wouldn't think I was suspicious."

The two apprentices nodded silently.

"Then they screamed, 'Ahhh!' I looked around and saw a blurry white shape at the end of the road. It was half-transparent, wearing a white kimono, and laughing in our direction. The geiko crouched down and hugged each other in fear. I was too scared to move, and the white shape started walking towards me."

Ensho crossed his arms, a stern expression on his face.

"What did you do?" Kiyotaka asked.

"I screamed and sat down on the spot. Before I knew it, the ghost was gone. Even the geiko were worried about me and asked if I was okay." Komatsu covered his face in shame. "I don't think I should go looking for it again. It might put a curse on me. No, I might even be possessed already," he said in a serious voice, looking down at his hands.

Ensho seemed exasperated, but Kiyotaka smiled and said, "Don't worry. I've

encountered possessed items before due to the nature of my work, and I don't sense anything from you."

"R-Really?"

"What, you're a psychic too? You really can do anything, eh?"

Kiyotaka ignored Ensho's quip and continued, "Yes, you're fine. So please wash your face and get ready to visit Takatsuji."

"All right." Komatsu nodded awkwardly and headed for the restroom.

Once he was gone, Ensho turned to Kiyotaka and said, "Hey, what do you think?"

"I think it's true that Komatsu saw something resembling a ghost, but whether it really *was* a ghost will require some more eyewitness information."

Ensho hummed and crossed his arms. "Well then, you and Komatsu can go to Takatsuji's place. I'll ask around in this area."

"Hmm, that's not a bad idea. Can you do that for me?"

"Yeah."

"I'll contact Kazuyo and ask her to help you."

"Oh." Ensho gave a dismissive nod. "Well, I'll see you back here tonight." He stood up, put his hat back on, and started to walk away.

"Yes, thank you."

Without turning back, Ensho raised a hand and left the office.

6

After Ensho left to investigate the ghost sightings, Kiyotaka and Komatsu went to visit Koichi Takatsuji, Kiyotaka's grandmother's acquaintance, at his home in Higashiyama near Chion-in Temple. They still had time, so they decided to go to the temple from the east side of Maruyama Park.

"This is actually my first time here," said Komatsu as they wandered through the park and into the temple grounds.

“There are surprisingly many people who haven’t been here,” replied Kiyotaka. “People tend to go to Yasaka Shrine and Kiyomizu-dera Temple instead.”

“Yeah. It feels familiar, though, since I’ve heard the name a lot.”

“It’s a shame that you’ve never been inside. You can feel its importance as the head temple of the Jodo sect, and its impressive Sanmon gate is both a national treasure and one of the three great gates of Japan.”

“I’ve heard of the three great gates before.”

“They consist of Horyu-ji Temple’s south main gate, Tofuku-ji Temple’s Sanmon gate, and this Sanmon gate at Chion-in,” Kiyotaka said, stopping to look up at the colossal gate.

“This is...incredible.” Komatsu gulped.

Chion-in’s Sanmon gate stood majestically atop a steep stone staircase with Higashiyama behind it. It was an enormous two-story gate about fifty meters wide that overwhelmed those who set eyes on it.

“It’s big, isn’t it? It’s said to be the biggest Sanmon gate in any Japanese temple. It was also donated by Hidetada Tokugawa, the second Tokugawa shogun.”

“You sure know a lot, kiddo. Are you a walking guidebook?” Komatsu laughed as he looked up at the gate. “Man, just seeing this makes the trip worth it.” He nodded and turned to leave.

“Now then, let’s visit the main hall.” Kiyotaka began to walk up the stairs.

“Huh? We’re climbing those stairs?”

“Yes, we might as well since we’re already here.”

“No can do. I’m too old for this.”

“Isn’t it a good opportunity to get some exercise?” Kiyotaka pulled the unenthusiastic detective up the stairs with him.

“You’re really devout, huh?” Komatsu asked after they paid their respects at the temple.

Kiyotaka chuckled. “That’s not true.”

“Really? But you gave so much as an offering.”

“I love the culture and beauty of shrines and temples. I believe that visiting them and spending a bit of money will contribute to the preservation of that culture. I don’t want to lose it,” the young man said earnestly.

Komatsu felt strangely awed by his words. He didn’t know what to say.

“It’s different from being devout, isn’t it?” Kiyotaka grinned mischievously.

The detective tilted his head. “You’re devout to the arts.”

“I’ll admit to that.” Kiyotaka chuckled and nodded.

Takatsuji’s house was only a short walk away from Chion-in Temple. It was fairly large, which was rare in cramped Kyoto and especially Higashiyama. However, it didn’t have a flashy exterior. It was the kind of Japanese-style residence that you would find in a rural town, with a porch and tiled roof. But unlike country homes, the yard wasn’t excessively large. It had stone lanterns, seasonal flowers, and a shishi-odoshi. It seemed very well maintained.

Komatsu looked up at the Takatsuji residence and let out a sigh of admiration. “It’s not new, but it’s amazing that they were able to build such a large house here.”

“The family was apparently very successful two generations ago, and the house has been passed down since then. By the way, our client, Koichi Takatsuji, seems to have married into the family.”

“Yeah, I looked that up too. The Takatsujis only had one child, a daughter, who married a guy from a prominent family in Kamakura. But you know, even though it was a prominent family, they were pretty much bankrupt. Apparently he married into the Takatsuji family in exchange for financial assistance. The son of a ruined family marrying into a rich family? That’s a case waiting to happen.” Komatsu rubbed his hands together.

Kiyotaka gave an exasperated shrug. “We’re on their property. Please be more discreet.”

“My bad.” Komatsu slumped his shoulders and looked up at the building. He could see a middle-aged man in a suit walking down the second-floor corridor. The man appeared to go down the stairs, and a little while later, he appeared at the front door. *Could that be Koichi Takatsuji?*

“Thank you for coming. I’m Dobashi. I’ve been entrusted with this house’s upkeep.” The man smiled and bowed.

Komatsu and Kiyotaka gave a slight bow back. *Basically, he’s a butler,* Komatsu thought as he introduced himself.

“Now then, please come this way.”

The two followed Dobashi as he walked leisurely towards the house.

“I want to know who killed me.”

And this is where the story began.

They had been taken to a Western-style room on the far end of the first floor. It was very obviously a reception room, with a plush carpet and an antique lounge suite.

There were five people gathered there besides Komatsu and Kiyotaka. First was Koichi Takatsuji (age 53), the client. He was sitting on the single-seat sofa with a gentle smile on his face. Next were two people grimacing at him: Koji Fukazawa (age 43), Koichi’s brother, who lived in Kamakura, and Ryoko Fukazawa (age 42), Koichi’s sister, who lived here in this house.

The last two people seemed dejected, but they didn’t show it on their faces. They were Yuka Takatsuji (age 50), Koichi’s wife, and Tatsuo Dobashi (age 45), the butler who lived in a room detached from the main house.

Komatsu gaped in confusion. *What does he mean, “I want to know who killed me”?*

Next to him, Kiyotaka smiled and asked, “Could you tell us more about the situation?”

Koichi nodded and began to explain. “On a night about twenty years ago, the power went out in this whole area. Apparently, during that time, I slipped on

the stairs and fell all the way to the bottom. Because of that, I lost my memory. I don't remember anything before the accident."

He gave a sad smile.

"The doctor said it was probably a memory disorder from hitting my head too hard. I was discharged from the hospital with no memories still. When I came back to this house, I looked through the photo albums and read my journal to regain—or rather, study—my past self. It appeared that I had a large circle of friends, but I was afraid of meeting people, so I spent a long time holed up at home."

He looked up.

"But it's been twenty years. I finally thought, 'I can't go on like this,' and started to be proactive about meeting people. I started by joining the Gion Peace Society since they'd invited me before. My wife was happy to see me take steps forward in life, so she joined me and we began doing work with them."

He paused to look at Kiyotaka.

"That was where I met your grandmother, Tsubaki. I'd had a few exchanges with her in the past, apparently. I asked her what was different about me between then and now, and she said, 'You seemed to be a very active person. You were popular.'"

"I see." Kiyotaka nodded.

"As I asked different people about my past, I began to feel like I was forgetting something extremely important. Feeling compelled to do something about it, I did a thorough search of my old study. There, I found a diary tucked between the bookshelves. It didn't seem like it had been hidden there, but rather that it had fallen there by accident." Koichi handed Kiyotaka the diary, which was really a generic college-use notebook.

"May I look inside?" Kiyotaka asked, making sure.

"Yes." Koichi nodded.

"In that case..." Kiyotaka quickly put on his white gloves, accepted the

notebook, and opened it carefully. The date written on the first page was from twenty years ago.

“Today, I took the train for the first time in a while. On the platform, someone pushed me from behind and I nearly fell onto the tracks. When I turned around, no one was there. I am certain that someone is targeting my life. I did find it strange when a car rushed at me when I was walking at night, and before that, it was a motorcycle. Maybe those were related. But since I have no conclusive proof yet, I’ll keep this as a record.”

The diary ended with that one page.

“Then, two days later, I fell down the stairs.”

A chill ran down Komatsu’s spine. *Is he saying that his fall was a crime rather than an accident?*

“Did it seem like there were any more attempts on your life after that?” asked Kiyotaka.

Koichi shook his head. “None whatsoever.”

“Which means...” Komatsu crossed his arms.

“I see.” Kiyotaka nodded. “The person who was targeting your life didn’t need to kill you anymore after you lost your memory.”

His words made tension spread across the room. Everyone gulped.

“I believe so,” said Koichi. “In a sense, I did die that night.”

“So that’s what you meant,” mused Komatsu.

“After discovering that, I wanted to know who was trying to kill me and why.”

“It’s only natural,” Kiyotaka said with a nod. He looked around at everyone gathered in the room. “These are the people who were in the house the night you fell, I presume?”

“Yes. I don’t want to suspect my relatives, but I don’t want to live in uncertainty forever either. I want to clear things up now, and so I’ve decided to drag my family into the matter.” Koichi clenched his fists in his lap.

Everyone smiled at him but seemed to be at a loss.

“But it’s possible that it really was just an accident,” said Kiyotaka. “It could also be the work of an outsider who isn’t present right now.”

“Yes, of course I’m aware of that. That’s part of why I want to get an objective opinion. Tsubaki told me that you’re a genius known as the Holmes of Kyoto,” Koichi said with a pleading look in his eyes.

Kiyotaka coughed. “Even my grandmother is saying that? No, I’m only called Holmes because of my surname.” He placed a hand on his chest and smiled.

The corner of Komatsu’s mouth twitched. *That response again?*

“Now then, I’d like to hear from everyone one by one. We’ll start with Koichi, so could everyone else please wait in another room?” Kiyotaka asked with an imposing look in his eyes.

Everyone nodded or agreed in their own way, seeming bewildered.

*

Meanwhile, Ensho was going around the geisha houses with Kazuyo.

“Oh, yes, Miss Akemi said she saw a ghost,” said a maiko.

“Do you know where?” Ensho asked, showing her a map of Gion.

“Umm...she passes through here on her way home from the teahouse, so it was around this area.” She pointed at a small road.

“Here, eh?” Ensho marked the place on the map with a highlighter.

Kazuyo, who was standing next to him, asked, “Did she say what the ghost looked like?”

“‘Twas a crying child with no eyeballs, only pitch-black sockets.”

Kazuyo hugged herself. “My, how frightening.”

“So did anyone else see it?” Ensho asked.

“The lady at Nakamura-ya saw it. She said she does not wish to walk outside anymore.”

Ensho and Kazuyo thanked the maiko and left.

“Which way’s Nakamura-ya?” asked Ensho.

“This way,” said Kazuyo, walking in high spirits. “I feel like I’ve become a detective too. How exciting.”

“Aren’t you a member of the Gion Peace Society? Don’t you do this kind of stuff?”

“No, I don’t. The Gion Peace Society is like a neighborhood association. We take turns patrolling the area, sometimes we get together for a meal, and when issues crop up, we report them to each other and say, ‘Be careful.’ That’s about it.”

“That’s so—” Ensho began before shutting his mouth.

Kazuyo giggled, having guessed what he was going to say. “It’s pointless, but since the elderly population in Gion is increasing, we need to support each other by socializing and checking in on each others’ well-being. Keeping up these interactions is a hassle, but people can’t live alone. The same goes for you, doesn’t it?” She grinned.

Ensho awkwardly looked away.

After asking everyone they could think of, the two of them decided to go back to the office for a break.

“I’ll make tea,” said Kazuyo.

“No, I’ll do it.”

“It’s fine. Unlike Kiyotaka, you don’t seem like you’d be good at that kind of thing.”

“That ain’t true.”

As they were arguing in the kitchen, the office door suddenly slid open and Rikyu flew in with a cheerful smile. “Sorry for the intrusion! I’m here to help, Kiyo. I’ll do anything, so just say the word.”

“You again?” Ensho grimaced.

Rikyu’s eyes instantly turned cold. “Sorry, but that’s my line. I came to see Kiyo, not you,” he said scornfully.

Kazuyo’s eyes lit up when she saw him. “Oh my, what a beautiful boy!” She

clapped her hands together.

Hearing her words, Ensho gave Rikyu a once-over and grinned. "I've got an idea."

7

Meanwhile, at the Takatsuji residence, Kiyotaka was interviewing people one by one.

First was the client, Koichi Takatsuji (age 53). Komatsu examined him carefully again. The man had youthful skin that made him look younger than his age. He wasn't especially handsome, but he had an aura that suggested he was successful in life. It was no surprise that Kiyotaka's grandmother had described him as an active, popular person. He was nothing like the stereotypical "man who married into a rich family" that Komatsu had imagined.

"I don't remember what happened that day," said Koichi. "When I woke up, I was in the hospital. All of the people gathered here today were there. My wife, Yuka, cried messy tears of joy when she saw that I was awake, but I could only think, 'Who is that?'" He gave a strained laugh.

"It must've been confusing," Kiyotaka said with a look of sympathy in his eyes.

Koichi tilted his head slightly. "Rather than confused, I felt like I was in a daze, perhaps because I hit my head. Everyone looked surprised when they found out I didn't know anything, and I vaguely heard the doctor saying, 'It's probably temporary.' Even I thought, 'Everything is a blur right now, but I'm sure I'll remember soon.' But no matter how long I waited, my memories of the past never came back." He looked down, dejected.

"Do you remember nothing whatsoever? Not even memories from your childhood?"

"I can vaguely remember scenery. When I went to Kamakura, it felt nostalgic, and when I walked around Gion, my heart beat faster, and I realized it was a place I liked. I can also read English since I was apparently good at it, and I vaguely remembered the ending of a book I supposedly liked before. So those kinds of things are still somewhere in my head. When I come across them, I feel

happy and sad at the same time.”

“I see. You’ve spent about twenty years in this house since you lost your memory. How was your relationship with your family during that time?”

“There weren’t any particular issues. Even though I supposedly married into the family, I could never quite believe it. My wife has always been considerate and stood up for me.”

“Has your younger sister always lived here with you?”

“No. The night I fell down the stairs, my younger brother and sister happened to be visiting. After I lost my memory, my wife was very depressed. My sister supported her during that time, and at some point, she started helping with the family business and moved in with us. My brother lives in Kamakura, but he visits often out of concern for me.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka nodded. “What about the butler, Dobashi?”

“I heard that his family has worked for the Takatsuji family for generations. Dobashi’s parents also used to live in the detached building to support us. Now that he’s taken over, his predecessors are living a relaxing life in Ohara.”

“Ohara is the perfect place to retire.” Kiyotaka smiled.

Sounds cold, though, Komatsu muttered in his head.

After getting the necessary information, Kiyotaka nodded and called for the next person, Koichi’s wife.

*

This is the testimony of Yuka Takatsuji (age 50).

Koichi’s wife was a fair-skinned, dainty woman with a reserved air. She wouldn’t be considered a beauty, but she had a graceful charm and seemed refined. She spoke standard Japanese, perhaps because of her husband’s influence, but her intonation made it clear that she was from Kansai.

“The day my husband fell down the stairs, the power had gone out at around 9 p.m. Koji and Ryoko, who had come to visit, had already gone to their rooms by that time. I had been thinking of turning in for the night as well, so I dismissed Dobashi and went back to my room. My husband, however, said, ‘I’m

going to light the candles my friend gave me and drink brandy while gazing at them,' and went into his study. I didn't think much of it and got into bed." She looked down sadly before continuing. "I think it was around the time I fell asleep that I found out my husband had fallen down the stairs. It was very loud. I immediately left my room, and so did Ryoko, who had also heard the noise. Then I saw him lying face-down at the bottom of the stairs. I nearly had a heart attack, thinking he might be dead. But he was groaning, so I called for an ambulance right away, relieved."

"I see," said Kiyotaka. "Your husband's memory loss must have been a great shock."

"Yes." She lowered her gaze. "I thought amnesia was just something in TV dramas, but it really can happen."

"What did you think about this request your husband made?"

"I was taken aback, but I think he might not have had a choice. He came back to live in this house without remembering anything, and it must've been stressful. I think it could be the stress built up over the past twenty years coming to the fore. I want to let him investigate until he's satisfied." She had a gentle, almost motherly look in her eyes.

"Do you think it was an accident?"

"Yes, I do. I saw Ryoko leave her room at the same time as me, while Dobashi was in his office and Koji was in the garden. Our house is rather large, but it's old, so there was originally only a bathroom on the first floor. I think my husband tried to go downstairs to use the bathroom after a few drinks and slipped."

"When you say 'originally,' do you mean there's a bathroom on the second floor now too?"

"Yes. Because of the accident, we renovated to add one on the second floor."

"I see." Kiyotaka nodded. "If it *were* an attempted murder, is there anyone who would benefit from your husband's death?"

Yuka tilted her head, a troubled look on her face. "I don't like to say this, but I'm the heir to the Takatsuji family's assets, so I'd have nothing to gain from my

husband's death. I would just be lonely. The same goes for his younger siblings, who would lose their connection to the Takatsuji family. I don't think Dobashi would gain anything either."

"Oh?" Komatsu murmured without thinking.

Kiyotaka continued his questioning. "Still, the Takatsuji family fortune is estimated to be quite large. Even if you're the heir, with your husband around, it would effectively be both of you inheriting it, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose, if you put it that way. But I grew up not wanting for anything, so I'm not really attached to money. All I want is to be able to keep living the way I have been. I'd rather be with my husband than have a lot of money," the woman said firmly.

Living the same way sounds easy, but her life is pretty luxurious, Komatsu thought. At the same time, he found himself touched that she valued her husband over wealth.

Kiyotaka remained calm and asked, "If money isn't a concern, then what about emotional matters? Were there any issues between you and your husband?"

"I don't know how he felt, but I fell in love with him after our parents introduced us. He was very kind, cheerful, and fun to be with. To a sheltered person like me, he seemed dazzling. I felt blessed when we got married. But now, he's even lost his memories of our wedding..." Yuka winced.

"How is your relationship now?"

"I thought it was going well. We joined the Gion Peace Society recently, and he's been enjoying the activities there. They've even been trying to solve local issues like detectives. Oh...they might be taking work away from you."

"No, it's fine. If there's anything the Gion Peace Society can't handle themselves, please call the Komatsu Detective Agency." Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and smiled gently.

"Of course." She smiled back.

"Now then, how was your husband's relationship with his siblings?"

“Good, I think. They have a large age gap and my husband is very mild-mannered, so they never got into fights.”

“And Dobashi?”

“My husband is very compassionate, so I think Dobashi thought highly of him. My late father had a high-handed streak, so I think Dobashi is glad that his new employer is a kind person, though he won’t say it out loud.”

“I see. Thank you,” Kiyotaka said with a smile before calling Dobashi in next.

*

This is the testimony of Tatsuo Dobashi (age 45).

Dobashi was a serious-looking man with a calm and composed air. He had a solid build and could probably have served as the family’s bodyguard as well.

“I usually work until around 10 p.m., and that night was no different.”

“The power went out at 9 p.m. That means you stayed for an hour afterwards, right?” Kiyotaka asked for confirmation.

“Yes.” Dobashi nodded. “The blackout made things dangerous, so I was making the rounds with a flashlight.”

“Did you see Koichi when you were doing so?”

“Yes. He was in his study, so I knocked and made sure he was all right.”

“What was he doing in the study?”

“He was sitting on an armchair with a glass of brandy in one hand and his chin resting on the other. He seemed to be thinking about something as he gazed at the candle’s flame. Oh, yes, I told him to be careful about the flame.”

“After that, did you leave the house and go to your detached room?”

“No, I went to my office on the first floor and wrote in my journal like I always do, using a lamp for light.”

“Would you mind if we had a look at that journal? Just that one day is fine.”

“Yes, go ahead. I thought you would say that, so I brought it with me.”

Dobashi handed over a black leather-bound notebook. Next to the date, it

simply said, “Koji and Ryoko visited. Power went out around 9. Patrolled, nothing out of the ordinary.” The notes continued below, under the date of the next day: “Koichi fell down the stairs. Hospitalized now.”

“Also, this is a summary of the doctor’s diagnoses. Koichi asked me to prepare it.” He held out a document detailing the opinion of the doctor who had examined Koichi at the time and Koichi’s condition after falling down the stairs.

“Thank you,” Kiyotaka said, looking down at the paper.

Komatsu leaned in to peek at the document and mumbled, “A strong hit near the temple, apparently. No damage to the back of his head. The memory loss is due to stimulation of the hippocampus, but the cause is unknown. Says stress might’ve had something to do with it.”

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka nodded and looked at Dobashi. “Were you in the office when Koichi fell?”

“Yes. I heard a loud noise and ran over. Yuka, Koji, and Ryoko were already there at the time, calling out, ‘Are you okay?’ I immediately called for an ambulance.”

“Noted.” Kiyotaka bowed. “Thank you. Could you please call Koji next?”

*

This is the testimony of Koji Fukazawa (age 43).

Koji was Koichi’s brother, younger by ten years. Perhaps because of that, he seemed younger than his age, both physically and mentally. Koichi’s fall had been right after Koji had gotten a job.

“That night, at dinner, my brother gave me and Ryoko, our younger sister, a lot to drink. Ryoko stumbled her way to her room, and since there was a power outage, I went outside with a flashlight to see if it was just us or the whole neighborhood.”

“Which was it?”

“The whole area’s power was out. The stars were really nice. I gazed at the night sky as I walked back to the house.”

“Yes, I’m sure the stars would’ve been beautiful,” Kiyotaka said with a smile.

“They were.” Koji nodded. “When I came back to the yard, the power was still out and the house was pitch-black. I pointed my flashlight at the house and saw someone walking down the second-floor hallway. I couldn’t tell who it was because the curtains were closed, but I soon found out it was my brother. After the figure approached the stairs, there was a really loud noise. Thinking someone had fallen down the stairs, I ran inside. My sister-in-law, Ryoko, and Dobashi arrived at the stairs around the same time I did. Dobashi called for an ambulance.”

“I see. By the way, was there a reason you and your sister were visiting that day?”

“My brother invited us over, saying we should come by every now and then. Well, part of it was because he was trying to console us. I was injured at the time and my sister’s engagement had been broken off.”

“What kind of injury? And may I ask why the engagement was canceled?”

“Oh, I played baseball throughout my school years and I’d just joined an adult team at the time. But I broke my shoulder and couldn’t play anymore, ha ha.” Koji gave an empty laugh as he rubbed his shoulder.

“I see,” Kiyotaka said with a sympathetic expression.

“As for my sister, since our parents’ business wasn’t doing well, her fiancé backed out. It was a business-based engagement in the first place. My sister said she was relieved, but she didn’t want to move back in with our parents after that.”

Kiyotaka nodded in understanding. “So that’s why she lives here now.”

“Yes, she lives here while helping with the Takatsuji family’s work. She also stayed single, which I guess is because her life here is comfortable.”

“What do you think about what happened that night, Koji?”

“You mean whether it was an accident or not? I’m pretty sure it was. Despite what my brother says, there isn’t anyone with a grudge against him or who would benefit from him dying.”

“Well then, what about someone who would be happy that he lost his

memory?”

Koji frowned and crossed his arms. “I’m not sure. If he discovered one of the Takatsuji family’s dirty secrets or something, then maybe Dobashi or someone would’ve done something on the orders of Yuka’s mother? I guess something like that could be possible.”

“A family secret, huh?” Kiyotaka folded his arms. “Where is Yuka’s mother now?”

“She’s very old, so she lives in a nursing home in north Kyoto. I heard that Dobashi’s parents, who also served the family before, go to check up on her every now and then even though they’re old too.”

“I see. The Dobashi family has an amazing sense of loyalty.”

“Yes. Apparently, they’ve been that way for generations. I’m always amazed by the relationship between the two families.”

Komatsu listened silently as Koji spoke, mulling over the possibility that the absent mother held the key to the mystery. Meanwhile, Kiyotaka continued his questioning.

“Do you think the Takatsuji family really does have a secret that can’t be made public?”

“Who knows? It’s just an idea I came up with. I don’t know if there really is a secret or not...but to be honest, I’m suspicious of whether my brother actually lost his memory in the first place.”

“Huh?” Komatsu blinked.

“Let’s say he discovered some secret, and because of that, someone was trying to kill him. So he fell down the stairs on purpose and pretended to have amnesia. Then his life wouldn’t be in danger anymore, right?”

“Oh, fake amnesia,” Komatsu murmured.

“Well, it’s not impossible.” Kiyotaka nodded. “Thank you,” he said before calling in the last person, Ryoko.

This is the testimony of Ryoko Fukazawa (age 42).

Ever since her arranged marriage had been canceled in her fourth year of university, she had remained single, living in this house. She was the type of woman who didn't care about wearing makeup or dolling herself up.

"That night, my older brother kept urging me to eat and drink. I'm sure he was worried about me since my engagement fell apart, but personally, I was relieved because I hadn't been enthusiastic about the marriage to begin with," she said with a shrug. Based on her general mood, it didn't seem like she was lying.

"What did you do that night, Ryoko?"

"I drank too much and passed out in the guest room without showering. When I flopped into bed, I thought drunkenly that I had to turn off the light, but then it went out by itself. At the time I thought Dobashi had turned it off for me, but it was actually a power outage. Despite being drunk, I jumped out of bed when I heard a loud noise coming from the stairs." She heaved a sigh.

"What do you think happened that night?"

"Well...I think Koichi might want to put the blame on Dobashi."

Komatsu's eyes widened at the unexpected words. Kiyotaka tilted his head and asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well, Dobashi is in love with Yuka. It's one-sided and he seems to be trying to hide it, but it's totally obvious. I think Koichi sensed that, so he suspects there's something between Dobashi and Yuka...especially since Dobashi is still single."

"I see." Kiyotaka folded his arms. "In other words, twenty years ago, Dobashi and Yuka were having an affair, and when Koichi found out, they plotted to kill him. He didn't die, but he lost his memory, which was good enough. Is that what you're saying?"

"Right. Oh, but I'm not saying it's the truth. I just think Koichi might've suspected that when he saw Dobashi pining over his wife. I'm pretty sure that notebook he pulled out was all made up." Ryoko gave an exasperated shrug.

"Is there truly nothing going on between Dobashi and Yuka?"

"I don't think so. Yuka is so devoted to my brother that it's hard to believe it was an arranged marriage. She doesn't have a lick of interest in anyone else," she said flatly, laughing.

"Thank you," Kiyotaka said with a slight bow. That concluded the interviews.

8

By the time they were done, the sun was beginning to set. Kiyotaka and Komatsu decided to leave for the day and headed to the front door.

"Thank you so much for coming," said Koichi as he saw them off. "Please let me know if you find anything."

"Yes, of course." Kiyotaka and Komatsu bowed and left through the gate.

Once they had distanced themselves from the house, Komatsu whispered, "What did you think, kiddo?" Kiyotaka was scarily observant. Sometimes, it really seemed like he could read minds. *How did those people look through his eyes?* Komatsu wondered as he studied the young man.

"What did *you* think, Komatsu?" Kiyotaka sent the question back.

"Huh? Me? Well, Yuka isn't really gorgeous, but I feel like she has a sort of magical allure that attracts men," Komatsu began.

"Er..."

"So I could see her having an affair with the butler, Dobashi. But for her it was just for fun. If Koichi found out and they got a divorce, it'd look bad for her. So she plotted to kill him and make it look like an accident, and as a result, he lost his memory, meaning there was no need to kill him anymore. She has an ulterior motive for being so concerned about her husband." He looked at Kiyotaka. "How's that?"

"That would indeed explain why the attempts on Koichi's life stopped after he lost his memory."

"Right? Another possibility is that the Takatsuji family has a huge fortune that they can't disclose publicly, and Koichi found out. Since he has a strong sense of justice, he tried to reveal it, and that's why he was targeted."

“That’s an interesting theory too.” Kiyotaka chuckled.

Komatsu frowned. “Interesting? What did you think of their testimonies, kiddo?”

“Well,” said Kiyotaka, stroking his chin, “I felt that they each answered honestly in some ways and dishonestly in others.”

“Huh?” Komatsu, who had been walking leisurely, suddenly turned to the young man in surprise. “Who was lying?”

“All of them. Each and everyone.”

“A-All of them?” Komatsu squeaked. “Is this one of those things where everyone’s guilty?”

“No, I don’t think so...” Kiyotaka turned around and looked up at the Takatsuji residence. “But there was one person who told an absolute lie,” he murmured.

“Who was it? Dobashi? The wife? Wait, maybe it wasn’t Dobashi who had the affair, but the younger brother? Or was the sister the liar? In cases like this, the least likely person is the culprit, right? Which means it could be Yuka’s mother.”

“You watch too much TV, Komatsu. More importantly, let’s go back to the office. Ensho must’ve gathered information on the ghost by now.” Kiyotaka smiled gently.

Komatsu clapped his hands together. “Oh yeah, there was that ghost ruckus too.”

“That’s right. Oh, and afterwards, could you investigate the power outage twenty years ago?”

“Sure.”

They walked west on Shijo Street. Since the sun was setting, the lanterns had begun to light up, making for a fantastical atmosphere that hadn’t been present earlier in the day.

“This place feels like a shrine festival every day,” Komatsu murmured to himself. “Maybe that’s why it’s so exciting.”

“I see. Shijo Street does have that kind of atmosphere.” Kiyotaka smiled

fondly.

At that moment, as the sun set, a temple bell echoed through the sky. Komatsu had gotten used to a lot of things while living in Kyoto, but the fact that it was normal to hear bells ringing in the evening still struck him as unusual. While he was lost in thought, they crossed Shijo Bridge and went south on Kiyamachi Street. Before long, the detective agency's sign came into view. The lights were on inside, meaning that Ensho had likely returned.

"Hey, we're back," Komatsu said, opening the sliding door.

Ensho's sneakers were at the entrance, along with another pair of sneakers and a pair of zori sandals. *The sandals are probably Kazuyo's. Do the other sneakers belong to someone she brought over?* Komatsu wondered. He went inside and found Ensho, Kazuyo, and a maiko facing away.

"Huh, did Momoko come with you?" he asked.

The maiko slowly turned around. She wasn't Momoko, but she was beautiful nonetheless, with a youthful yet intensely captivating face.

Komatsu was too nervous to look her in the eye. "Oh, um, who is this?" he asked awkwardly. The maiko scowled unhappily while Ensho chuckled.

Kiyotaka came in behind the flustered detective. "Oh? Rikyu, you came. Why are you dressed like that?"

"Huh?" Komatsu looked at the maiko again. "R-Rikyu?! You mean *that* Rikyu?"

Rikyu Takiyama was Kiyotaka's younger brother figure, who was both an amazingly pretty boy and an expert in judo.

"Yeah, it's me," Rikyu said in an annoyed tone. "Hey, Kiyo, Ensho said I'd be able to help you if I dressed up as a maiko, but is that true? I'm not being tricked, am I?" he asked pleadingly.

"You came in and said you'd do *anything* to help," replied Ensho. "What're you so upset about?"

"I know, but..."

Kazuyo smiled happily and put her hands together. "You really do make a good maiko. I can't believe you're a boy. Well, I'll take the credit too."

Apparently, she was the one who had turned Rikyu into a maiko.

“Yes, it really does suit you,” said Kiyotaka. “Kazuyo, you have amazing skills.”

“Not you too, Kiyo!”

“If you could accompany Momoko dressed like that, it would be incredibly reassuring. We can definitely rely on you,” Kiyotaka said with a smile.

“Huh? Really? Well then, I guess I’ll do my best.”

Komatsu and Ensho’s mouths twitched at how easily the boy cheered up.

“Well, that ain’t the only reason I got Rikyu to be a maiko,” Ensho said, spreading out a map of the Gion area on the table. Several places were marked in highlighter. “These are the places with ghost sightings.”

All of the locations were small roads. None of them were large like Hanamikoji Street. *Come to think of it, I was also on a small path when I saw the ghost,* thought Komatsu.

“I see,” murmured Kiyotaka. “That narrows it down.”

“It does?” Komatsu tilted his head.

“The marked roads are often used by geisha,” replied Kazuyo.

“Oh, huh.”

“Also, these are the witnesses and their statements,” said Ensho, tossing the report onto the table.

Kiyotaka picked it up and looked it over. Most of the witnesses were geisha. There were other people too, of course, but in those cases, there was still a geisha in the vicinity. Two types of ghosts had been spotted: a woman in a white kimono with long hair and a crying child with no eyeballs.

Komatsu frowned as he read the report. “Come to think of it, there was also a geiko nearby when I saw the ghost. And the ghost was wearing a white kimono...”

“Those ghosts are pretty clichéd,” said Ensho.

“Yes, they’re very stereotypical ghosts,” agreed Kiyotaka.

“Which means,” Rikyu spoke up, “it’s one of those content creators, isn’t it? That stuff is popular these days.” He crossed his arms, which made for a strange sight since he was dressed as a beautiful maiko.

“Content creators?” Kazuyo tilted her head.

“He suspects that someone is filming geisha being scared by ghosts and uploading the videos to the internet,” Kiyotaka explained.

“Wh-What? That’s terrible,” Kazuyo stammered.

“Yes, it’s inexcusable.” Kiyotaka nodded. “It’s very possible, though. It’s logical to assume the ghosts are a manmade phenomenon.”

“Yeah, so I looked for hidden cameras but I couldn’t find any,” said Ensho.

“They must be filming as it happens, then. Sounds like another job for Rikyu.”

“Leave it to me,” Rikyu said with a proud smile. “If that’s how it is, I’ll be the best decoy ever.”

As they were talking, Komatsu was shaking in his boots.

“What’s wrong, Komatsu?” asked Ensho.

“Th-They’re getting a kick out of scaring people? That’s messed up. Do you know how scared I was?! I won’t let them get away with this!” Komatsu slammed his fist against the desk.

“You’re really fired up, huh?” remarked Rikyu.

“He seems to have had a very frightening experience.”

“The guy had a blanket over his head.”

“Shut up!” Komatsu yelled.

“My apologies,” said Kiyotaka. “Your anger is justified, though. Let’s put these fake ghosts to rest.”

“Yeah!” Komatsu and Rikyu exclaimed. Ensho only shrugged.

“How exciting!” Kazuyo, who had been watching from a short distance away, enthusiastically clenched both of her fists.

Ichiko and Momoko, the geisha who were being stalked, had work until 1 a.m., so the group at Komatsu Detective Agency headed out to deal with the ghost problem first. It was 11:30 p.m., and they were moving towards one of the sighting locations with Rikyu dressed up as a maiko.

“It’s so hard to walk like this,” grumbled Rikyu. “Now that I think about it, instead of making me cross-dress, couldn’t you have just asked Aoi to wear this?”

“And put her in danger?” Kiyotaka and Ensho said in unison, dead serious.

Rikyu’s eyes widened. “You suddenly synced up... You guys really are obsessed with Aoi. Ugh.” He grimaced.

“Huh?” Komatsu blinked. *What does that mean? I know the kiddo’s going out with Aoi and is crazy about her, but Ensho too?* He glanced at Ensho and recalled Aoi’s carefree smiling face. *It can’t be.*

“Now then, Rikyu, the filming location seems to be around this corner, so we’ll leave you here,” said Kiyotaka.

“All right. If a ghost shows up, I just have to pretend to be scared, right?”

“Yes, please do that.”

“Leave it to me.” Rikyu winked and turned the corner by himself.

Although they were still in Gion, the scenery changed drastically when going from one street to another. Right behind the bustling, quaint restaurant district was a deserted, almost spooky road. It met the conditions from the eyewitness reports: an atmospheric place that geisha passed through.

“You picked a really promising spot. Well done,” Komatsu murmured.

There was no response from Kiyotaka or Ensho. *Huh?* He turned around, but the two were nowhere to be found. “Where’d they go? Well, whatever.” He was confused, but he assumed they had gone to catch the person hiding somewhere with a camera.

He looked back at Rikyu, who was walking gracefully, holding a cloth-wrapped

box with one hand. “Man, he really does look like a maiko. He’d fool me even though I know it’s him,” he said with a strained laugh.

He continued to watch, but the ghost had yet to appear. Suddenly, he realized he was surrounded by fog. *What’s this?* He looked up, and right next to him was a woman in a white kimono looking down at him.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!” Falling onto his rear, Komatsu backed away, hands on the ground. *They said the ghosts were fake—just to scare the geisha—and I thought so too, but no! It’s real! It’s gonna curse me this time for sure!* “Heeeeeeeelp!” he screamed at the top of his lungs, eyes wide open.

Suddenly, the fog vanished. The woman disappeared at the same time. Replacing them was the sight of Kiyotaka and Ensho seizing two men dressed in black. Rather than catching them, it was more like they were constricting them.

“S-Sorry! I’m—I’m really sorry! Please let me go!”

“Owww!”

The men being restrained looked like they were still university students.

“A fog machine and a hologram. The ghosts really were manmade. Why were you doing such a thing?” asked Kiyotaka, putting pressure on one of the men’s arms.

Ensho did the same. “Because you wanted to post the videos, right?”

“A-At first, but now it’s because we were asked to...”

“Asked to?”

“We’ll explain everything, so please let go!”

Kiyotaka and Ensho freed the arms of the men, who were now on the verge of tears.

“Run!” they shouted, dashing off at full speed.

The two apprentices didn’t bother giving chase. The students were running in the direction of Rikyu, after all.

“Oh, good. I was afraid I wouldn’t get a chance to help.” Rikyu gave a slight shrug before turning his foot to trip one of the men, who fell to the ground. He

then grabbed the other by the arm and threw him over his shoulder on top of the first man.

“Th-That’s the inhumane speed and strength I remember,” said Komatsu, shaking as he recalled how Rikyu had fought during the cannabis cult incident.

“Well done, Rikyu.” Kiyotaka applauded, satisfied.

“Don’t just stand there and clap. We gotta tie ’em up,” said Ensho, exasperated. He took some rope out of his backpack.

“Indeed,” said Kiyotaka, accepting the rope.

The perpetrators were restrained in the blink of an eye. They now sat on the ground, having lost the will to fight.

Komatsu looked down on them with a suspicious frown. “Why did they spook me when there was a maiko on the same street?” *Did they realize that Rikyu was a guy? Even so, his beautiful face would’ve made for a great scene...*

The students laughed awkwardly.

“Your reaction is funnier than anyone else’s, just like last time...”

“Yeah, it’s pretty amazing.”

Komatsu facepalmed, while Ensho and Rikyu nodded firmly in understanding.

Kiyotaka crouched down and peered into the students’ faces. “Well then, would you tell us everything? Who asked you to do this?” Despite his smile, they seemed to sense an indescribable pressure coming from him. They turned pale and nodded fervently.

I know, his smile is really scary sometimes, thought Komatsu, clenching his fist in front of his chest.

The students’ confession rendered everyone speechless:

“I-It was the Gion Peace Society.”

“But they said they wouldn’t pay us a single yen if anyone found out...”

After interrogating the students, the Komatsu Detective Agency group left them at Kazuyo's house for the time being and headed to the teahouse on Hanamikoji Street, where Momoko was.

"Is it all right to leave them with Kazuyo?" Komatsu wondered as they walked.

"We called some men to keep watch, so it should be fine," Kiyotaka replied.

"That's not what I mean. You heard what they said, right? Was it really the Gion Peace Society that put them up to it? Kazuyo's a member, so wouldn't she let them escape?"

Kiyotaka chuckled at the detective getting so worked up. "Even if she does, we have the evidence." He had recorded their voices and taken their driver's licenses.

"Yeah, but... Man, I just can't believe this."

"Personally, I feel relieved because everything makes sense now." Kiyotaka stopped at the back of the teahouse. "Now then, Rikyu, Momoko, and Ichiko are in here, so please go in through the back door and accompany them when they leave. They're already expecting you."

"Roger." Rikyu saluted and went inside.

The teahouse's front door faced Hanamikoji Street.

"The rest of us will spread out to look for the stalker and capture him. Komatsu will go south, Ensho west, and I'll take the north."

At Kiyotaka's signal, the other two men nodded and went in their respective directions.

"The kiddo seems more like the boss than I do..." Komatsu muttered with mixed feelings as he walked south to Kennin-ji Temple. From there, he entered Hanamikoji Street, which was still bustling even late at night. He looked around, acting like a tourist.

The teahouse's sliding door opened and out came Ichiko, Momoko, and Rikyu. They smiled and bowed as they left, then cheerfully headed north on the street.

Before long, Komatsu noticed Ichiko and Momoko flinch. *The stalker must be behind that pole.* Rikyu immediately stood in front of the geisha and headed

towards the pole. A man jumped out from behind it and ran north.

“It’s him!” Komatsu quickly joined the chase.

The stalker was as Momoko had described: a man wearing a hat, glasses, a black jacket, and black pants. Ichiko had mentioned expensive shoes, but it was too dark to tell. Rikyu was chasing him too, but because of the maiko disguise, he couldn’t run as fast as he would’ve liked.

At that moment, Ensho came out from the street to the west and tripped the stalker, who tumbled to the ground.

“Nice, Ensho!” Komatsu clenched his fist—but the next moment, the stalker rolled forward and ran off again. “Seriously?!”

“Wow, he’s pretty athletic,” Rikyu remarked, surprised.

“Dammit, I let down my guard because I assumed a stalker would be weak.” Ensho clicked his tongue in frustration and continued the chase.

As the stalker was about to exit onto Shijo Street, Kiyotaka appeared. Rather than blocking the man’s way, he acted like a pedestrian before grabbing his arm as he tried to run past, twisting it back and upwards, knocking him to the ground.

“You did it, Kiyo!” Rikyu’s eyes sparkled. Meanwhile, Ensho looked annoyed.

Kiyotaka pulled the hat off the man’s head and chuckled. “I knew it. It was you...Koji.”

Pinned beneath him was Koji Fukazawa—Koichi Takatsuji’s younger brother—his face twisted in pain.

11

It was now three in the morning. The trio from Komatsu Detective Agency had made their way to the Takatsuji residence along with Kazuyo and Ayako, the geisha house proprietress. With everyone gathered in the reception room, Kiyotaka informed the family that Koji had been stalking a young geisha.

“Sorry, we had to leave him tied up,” he added. “He’s nimbler than we

expected.”

Koichi and Yuka Takatsuji, Ryoko Fukazawa, and Tatsuo Dobashi looked at the bound man in shock.

“Koji was a stalker? I can’t believe it,” said Koichi, turning pale and putting a hand over his mouth.

“However, Koichi...”

The man looked at Kiyotaka in confusion.

“I believe this case has something to do with you.”

Koichi blinked. The others looked puzzled.

“Huh? What does Koichi have to do with Koji stalking a geisha?” Ryoko murmured quietly.

Koji looked down, while Yuka and Dobashi said nothing.

“Exactly,” said Koichi, frowning in suspicion. “What do you mean?”

“First, let’s discuss the truth behind what happened twenty years ago,” Kiyotaka began. “I would like to look back at the night when you fell down the stairs.”

Everyone grew silent, giving him their full attention.

“That night, the people in this house were Koichi, his wife, Yuka, his siblings, Koji and Ryoko, and the butler, Dobashi.”

The members of the household quietly nodded. Kazuyo and Ayako seemed conflicted, while Ensho stood leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, looking at Kiyotaka in a “let’s see what you’ve got” way.

“I had Komatsu investigate the blackout. The power really did go out in this whole area at around 9 p.m. that day. According to the testimonies, Yuka retired to her bedroom early because of the power outage. Ryoko did the same because she had too much to drink. Koichi was drinking brandy while gazing at the candlelight, Dobashi spoke to him and then went to his office, and Koji went outside to see if other houses were affected by the blackout. Am I correct so far?”

The group nodded in agreement.

“After that, Koichi fell down the stairs leading from the second floor to the first floor. Koji had returned shortly before that and was in the yard with a flashlight. When he pointed the flashlight at the house, he saw a silhouette that looked like Koichi walking down the hallway, but since the curtains were closed, he didn’t know who it was. Right after that, there was a very loud noise. Startled, Koji ran inside. Yuka, Ryoko, and Dobashi also came running out of their rooms.” Kiyotaka paused again, looking at the named people for confirmation.

They all nodded silently.

“When everyone arrived, Koichi was lying face-down at the bottom of the stairs. The doctor’s diagnosis said he had suffered a hit near the temple, so the position he was found in is likely true. The memory loss is from stimulation to the hippocampus, but the doctor did not know the exact cause and said that stress could have had something to do with it. At the time, Koichi seemed to think that his life was being targeted, so it’s reasonable to believe that he was stressed. Now, this raises a question: if someone fell down the stairs, would they land face-down? In most cases, the person would slip on their heel and land on their rear. If they hit their head, it would most likely be the back of their head. From that point, they might fall forward, but according to the diagnosis, Koichi did not hit the back of his head. So what situation would result in someone going down the stairs and falling face-down?”

Ryoko’s face stiffened. “If they were running fast? Like if they really needed to use the bathroom.”

“That is indeed a possibility, but Koichi was not incontinent when he fell, so it doesn’t seem like he would have been that desperate. Therefore, we can consider the possibilities that he was running away from someone or was shoved from behind. In either of those cases, it would be natural to assume that the other party was someone in the house.” Kiyotaka looked around at the members of the Takatsuji household.

“Wh-Who would do such a thing? I would never,” said Ryoko, looking away.

Kiyotaka sighed and said, “I would like to ask some questions of the person

who told a conclusive lie.”

Everyone blinked.

“Who lied?”

“Koichi really was lying about his amnesia?”

“My amnesia is not a lie!”

“Wasn’t it Dobashi who lied?”

Ensho chuckled from his position at the wall. “The liar is obviously the stalker.” He glared coldly at Koji.

“Huh?” Surprised, Komatsu turned to Kiyotaka for confirmation.

The young detective didn’t deny it.

“Koji lied?” Koichi asked, looking at his brother in confusion.

Koji made an annoyed face. “I didn’t lie. I’ll admit that I was following a maiko. My one-sided feelings drove me to do it. But that doesn’t mean you can say I was lying during my testimony about Koichi’s accident.”

“Right, even if Koji went too far with his feelings, he’s not the kind of person who would lie,” insisted Ryoko.

“Y-Yes, I agree,” said Yuka.

Ensho turned away and yawned, seeming to have lost interest in talking. Komatsu side-eyed him and his face twitched. *A free spirit, huh?*

“Shall we check, then?” Kiyotaka asked with a sharp look in his eyes.

“Check?” Everyone looked puzzled.

“Yes. But first, Koichi, I’ll need you to do something for me.”

Kiyotaka whispered something to Koichi and then spoke to Rikyu, who was sitting in a corner of the room. The boy nodded and left.

Did he go to get something? Komatsu wondered.

“Now then, could everyone come outside to the yard with me?” Kiyotaka asked.

Everyone stood up and went outside, feeling confused and concerned.

Since Dobashi had lit the candles in the lanterns, the garden was faintly illuminated. Kiyotaka had asked for the lights inside to be turned off, leaving the house completely dark.

“This is a reenactment of that night,” Kiyotaka explained. “Twenty years ago, the house was pitch-black like this. The curtains on the second floor were also closed, as you see now.”

Everyone nodded silently.

“Shortly before Koichi fell down the stairs, Koji was looking around the yard and shone his flashlight at the house. Koji, you said you saw Koichi’s silhouette, right?”

Koji nodded, not saying a word.

“I borrowed a flashlight from Dobashi before coming outside. He said this was the one you used.” Kiyotaka pointed the flashlight at the house. It was quite bright and illuminated the building clearly. He continued to hold it there for a while, but nothing happened.

“What are you trying to do, Kiyotaka?” Koichi asked, tilting his head in confusion.

The others had puzzled looks on their faces as well.

“He’s exposing the stalker’s lie,” answered Ensho, not Kiyotaka.

“The lie?” Koichi blinked.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “I actually have Rikyu walking back and forth down the second-floor hallway right now. But even though I’m pointing the flashlight there, you can’t see his silhouette, can you? Light coming from this side of the window won’t project shadows of things on the other side.”

Everyone’s eyes widened. They looked back at the illuminated house.

“Therefore, Koji, you were lying when you said you saw Koichi from the yard. Now, why did you lie? What are you hiding?”

“I... I...” Koji clammed up, his body trembling. Eventually, he clenched his fists and said, “Sorry. That night, I—”

“No!” Ryoko interrupted. “Koji only did it because he was asked to!”

“Ryoko!” Koji immediately scolded her.

Kiyotaka nodded firmly as though he understood everything. “Correct. Koji was asked to do it.”

“Huh?” Komatsu’s eyes widened. “By who?”

“Yes, that’s the important question. Yuka, it was you, wasn’t it?” Kiyotaka turned around to look at Koichi’s wife.

“Yuka?!” exclaimed Koichi, distraught. “It can’t be...”

The other family members looked sheepish rather than surprised. Apparently they had known the truth but kept quiet.

Yuka nodded, not flustered in the least. “Yes, I asked Koji to do it.”

“Did you ask him to kill Koichi?” asked Kiyotaka.

Yuka shook her head. “No, I asked him to make my husband think his life was being targeted. I had no intention of killing him.”

“Didn’t you consider that pushing him on a train platform or attacking him with a car or motorcycle at night could kill him?”

Koji shrugged. “On the platform, I pushed him from a position where he definitely wouldn’t fall, and if he seemed like he really would fall, I would’ve saved him. I used the car and bike to give him a scare, but I made sure I wouldn’t hit him. I’m confident in my reflexes and driving skills.”

Koichi seemed to be too shaken to process Koji’s words. He grabbed his wife’s shoulders and asked, “Yuka, why would you do such a thing?”

“Well, that’s because you had the hots for another woman at the time,” she replied in a quiet yet firm tone, avoiding eye contact.

Koichi froze, dumbfounded.

Yuka laughed weakly. “You really did lose your memory, huh? I thought you might’ve been pretending, which would’ve been fine too.”

Komatsu stepped forward, unable to keep quiet anymore. “Why did you want Koichi to think his life was being targeted?”

“My husband’s affair was with a popular geiko in Gion. At the time, I assumed their relationship was only a passing fancy and was going to turn a blind eye. My husband was forced to marry me for his family’s sake, so I didn’t think it was unexpected for him to fall in love with someone else. I was sure his feelings would die down soon enough and decided to wait.” Yuka gave a small sigh. “But as their relationship progressed, I grew anxious and asked Koji to scare him. I wanted my husband to think that getting close to a popular geiko would invite trouble from jealous men. I...wanted him to come to his senses.” She looked down, a pained expression on her face.

“Yuka...”

“But it didn’t work. Their relationship wasn’t just a passing fancy; they were seriously in love with each other. The other woman was a geiko who worked under Ayako.” Yuka shifted her gaze to the proprietress, who cast her eyes down apologetically. “Ayako told me that the two of them were planning to elope. They had decided to throw away everything and live together. That would’ve been a disaster, so I invited Koji and Ryoko over that night. I wanted them to persuade my husband while I wasn’t around.”

Ryoko nodded, ashamed. “Koichi was really selfish back then. Even though he should’ve been grateful that the Takatsujis provided us with financial support in exchange for marrying into the family, he took advantage of Yuka’s silent devotion to him and spent the family’s money on whatever he wanted.”

“Yuka was always putting up with it, and I felt really bad,” Koji added.

Koichi was lost for words.

Yuka looked at him apologetically. “That night, Koji and Ryoko criticized my husband like so, and he must’ve reached his limit. He hadn’t finished preparing for the elopement yet, but he said, ‘I don’t want to stay here any longer.’”

Koji took over the story with downcast eyes. “I panicked. If Koichi left the house, we’d be cut off from the Takatsuji family. It’d be over for us. I tried to stop him. I said, ‘Don’t be selfish,’ and he replied, ‘Who’s the one being selfish? I don’t want to sacrifice myself for the family anymore. I want to be with the

person I love.' I couldn't say anything else after that."

Yuka smiled self-deprecatingly and said, "I was listening to their conversation from the room next door. Then the power went out. My husband holed himself up in his study, and Koji left the house, probably because he felt awkward. I went to my husband and asked to speak with him alone, but he said, 'I don't want to see your face. I'm getting out of this place,' and left the room, leaving me behind. As I watched him walk away, something snapped inside me. I said, 'If you're going to leave, I'll kill you and then myself,' and ran after him with a knife. He turned pale and ran away. I think he was scared. I was serious at the time, after all. I just couldn't forgive him. I thought I'd rather kill him than let another woman take him from me. He ran for his life, and when he tried to rush down the stairs, he slipped and fell. When I saw him lying motionless at the bottom, I thought he'd died. That was when I finally calmed down." She put a hand over her mouth as she vividly recalled that moment.

"So that's what happened," Koji murmured. "I thought for sure that you'd pushed him."

Ryoko and Dobashi looked at each other and nodded slightly as if they'd thought the same thing. Apparently, everyone had assumed Yuka had pushed Koichi down the stairs.

Yuka gave another self-deprecating smile and said, "I was running at him with a knife, so it was basically the same as if I'd pushed him. That's why it didn't matter what people thought. His fall made a really loud noise, so everyone came running right away and we called an ambulance. Then, when my husband woke up, he had no memories." She straightened her back and took a deep breath. "I didn't know if he was telling the truth or not, but I truly thought it was a chance for us to start over. I was...happy."

Koichi was lost for words as he listened to Yuka's story.

"After my husband was discharged from the hospital, the geiko he'd been seeing came to visit me. She'd heard from Ayako that he'd lost his memories. She didn't try to meet him and instead prostrated herself in front of me and said, 'I've done something terrible. You can hit me as much as you want. I'm truly sorry.' I wanted to hit her with all my might, but I couldn't, because in the

end, I'd gotten my beloved back. I told her, 'My past husband has died, so please move on with your life. And please don't appear before him again.' She nodded without saying anything and left Gion. After that, my life was peaceful again. My husband and I started anew, and every day was happy for me. But..." She clenched her fists. "Twenty years later, I met a girl in Gion who was the spitting image of that geiko."

The room fell silent.

"It was Ichiko, wasn't it?" Kiyotaka asked quietly.

"Yes."

"Huh?" Komatsu blurted out. "I-Ichiko? Not Momoko?"

"Yes." Kiyotaka nodded. "Koji wasn't stalking the maiko, Momoko, but the geiko, Ichiko. The two of them were always together and it happened to be shortly after Momoko's debut, so everyone assumed he was stalking Momoko."

"Huh? But then, does that mean..." Komatsu stammered, dumbfounded.

"Ichiko is Koichi's daughter. Am I correct?"

Tension filled the room. Ayako made a bitter expression, while Koichi's eyes widened as if he'd been caught off guard.

After a short while, Yuka gave a small nod. "Yes. Ichiko is the daughter of my husband and the geiko."

"I am truly sorry," said Ayako, bowing deeply. "Ichiko's mother went by the name of Yumeko. She had an illicit affair with Koichi, and they were going to abandon their dreams, homes, and everything they owned in order to live together. When I realized that, I tried to persuade her many times, of course. I insisted that it wasn't right to barge in on someone else's relationship, but the more I opposed it, the more stubborn she became." Ayako sighed. "Then Koichi had his accident. Yuka doesn't seem to be aware, but Yumeko secretly visited him at the hospital. He didn't remember anything about her. She cried and cried, thinking she'd been punished for her sins. After apologizing to Yuka, she went back to Oita to live with her parents. Some time later, I heard that she'd given birth to a baby girl."

Everyone listened to Ayako's story in silence.

"But when that girl grew up, she said she wanted to be a geiko like her mother. She had the same stubborn nature as her mother, and in the end, Yumeko caved, thinking it was fate. She put her daughter in my care, and I gave her the name Ichiko. Yumeko never told me the truth, but Ichiko is Koichi's child. I was curious, so I looked into Yumeko's situation and found out that she was still unmarried when she'd given birth. While she was raising her child, a childhood friend of hers had started helping her, and eventually, they got married. Ichiko said to me, 'I'm not related to my current dad by blood, but he loves me as if I'm his own child. I don't know what kind of person my real dad was, but my current dad is the only dad in my heart.' I was relieved to find out that even though she didn't know who her real father was, she was loved by her current one." Ayako placed a hand on her cheek.

"Meanwhile, Yuka was distraught when she discovered Ichiko, wasn't she?" asked Kiyotaka, looking at Koichi's wife.

"Yes," Yuka said softly. "I wasn't able to give my husband a child and yet that woman was already pregnant when she apologized to me. A demon was born inside me. I wanted to kill my husband's daughter," she admitted in a low voice.

Everyone shivered. Koichi was still in shock.

"But you couldn't," Kiyotaka said gently.

Yuka trembled and nodded. "I couldn't. I was frustrated and jealous and it was driving me insane, but I couldn't do it..."

"So you tried to drive Ichiko out of Gion. You wanted to scare her so that she'd run back home to Oita, right?"

Yuka looked down, her eyes welling up with tears.

"Oh, so that's why you had Koji play the role of a stalker," Komatsu said with a firm nod.

"Yes, it was the same as when I had him scare my husband. I asked him to scare her without directly harming her."

"The ghost sightings were at your behest too, weren't they?" asked Kiyotaka.

Komatsu thought back to the students they had caught earlier, who had said that someone from the Gion Peace Society had asked them to do it.

“Yes,” Yuka admitted after a pause. “When the ghost sightings became a topic of discussion at the Gion Peace Society, I asked Koji to also patrol the area while he was pretending to be a stalker. He told me that the ghosts seemed to be a prank played by students. Then it struck me—if there were ghosts in addition to the stalker, Ichiko might really get sick of Gion and go back home. So I asked the students to keep up the prank, presenting myself as someone from the Gion Peace Society.”

Ensho, who had been listening in silence, clicked his tongue in exasperation. “Ugh, this is what I get for listening patiently. How selfish and shallow is this woman? Is this what rich, sheltered girls turn into when they grow old? If you really hate her, do something your damn self instead of using other people!” he spat.

Kiyotaka shot him a warning glance. “Ensho, you’re going too far.”

“No, he’s right,” said Yuka. “Really...I’m so ashamed of myself. I want to apologize to everyone. First to Koji, then Ichiko, who isn’t here. And Koichi...” She looked at her husband. “Koichi, I tied you down. I’m truly sorry. Your memory loss must’ve been because of the stress I caused you. Now that you know everything, I can’t stop you from making whatever decision you see fit. Please live the rest of your life however you wish.” She bowed deeply, keeping her head down as she waited for a response.

Koichi remained stunned for a while before eventually bowing back and saying, “No, it’s all my fault. I’m sorry, Yuka. And I’m sorry for all of the trouble I caused the rest of you. Tomorrow, I’d like to go around and apologize to everyone with my wife.”

Yuka looked at him in surprise. “What?”

“I think both of us were shallow. And it was precisely because I lost my memories that I was able to truly recognize your kindness. I’ve been exposed to your generosity for the past twenty years. You were a wonderful wife to me, and it was me who drove you to take those desperate actions. I want to apologize for all the pain I caused you.”

Yuka's face scrunched up.

"Let's start over properly this time, as husband and wife," Koichi continued.

Yuka wailed and burst into tears. Koichi gently wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"Ayako, please take good care of my daughter, Ichiko," he added. "I won't step forward as her father because she seems to have a better one already, but I'd like to support her as much as I can."

"Yes, please do," said Yuka, bowing as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I will," said Ayako, tearing up as well.

As Kiyotaka watched the couple, he whispered to Komatsu and Ensho, "Let's leave it at that for today."

The three of them quietly left the house.

*

"So in the end, Yuka was directly responsible for Koichi falling down the stairs," Komatsu said as soon as they left the property.

"She must've looked really mad," said Ensho. "The guy was so scared that he lost his memory after falling."

"They say it's scarier when a calm person snaps," said Kiyotaka.

"You're one to talk, kiddo." Komatsu grimaced.

"Wait up, guys! Jeez!" shouted an angry Rikyu, running after them. "You're so mean, Kiyo. I was walking back and forth down the hallway for *ages!*"

"Oh, I forgot to give you the 'stop' signal. I'm sorry. Thank you, Rikyu. You were a great help." Kiyotaka smiled.

Rikyu grinned happily. "Really? That's good, then."

Komatsu and Ensho looked at each other, shrugged, and muttered, "He's too easy."

"Anyway, I'm glad it all worked out," said Komatsu, looking up at the night sky. Even though they were in the middle of town, Gion didn't have any tall

buildings obstructing the sky, and the stars were twinkling beautifully.

12

Kura's grandfather clock rang out seven times.

Huh, it's already 7 p.m., I thought, standing up and stretching. I had been sitting at the counter, absorbed in a book about antiques. It was time to close shop, so I flipped the sign hanging on the door from "OPEN" to "CLOSED" and drew the curtains.

As I was draping cloth over the shelves one by one, the doorbell rang. *Could it be?* I turned around, and as expected, it was Holmes. He had messaged me a little while ago, saying that he'd stop by on his way back from work.

Holmes was wearing a button-up shirt, jacket, and jeans. I did love his usual white dress shirt, black vest, and black pants, but this casual style looked great on him too. I only got to admire him for a second before—

"Aoi!" he exclaimed, hugging me. It felt like being jumped on by a big dog.

I widened my eyes in shock. "Wh-What's wrong?"

"Sorry, I'm low on Aoi energy."

"What?!"

"Whenever something happens, I endure it by thinking, 'After this is over, I'm going to hug Aoi.' I've amassed quite a sum in my 'Aoi hug savings,'" he said, still clinging to me.

"Aoi hug savings?"

"It reached the point where I stopped counting." He squeezed me tightly. After a little while, he let out a deep breath and slowly let go. "Sorry about that. Thanks to you, I feel a little better now," he said with a smile, placing a hand on his chest. It was such a smooth gesture that it was hard to believe that just a second ago, he'd been acting like a big dog, talking about Aoi energy and Aoi hug savings.

I couldn't help but chuckle at the extreme contrast. "You must've had a long

day. Oh, right, I'll make coffee."

"Shall I do it?"

"No, I'll do it. You've worked hard, so I want to put my heart into it."

"Aoi...thank you." He blushed slightly, seeming pleased.

I giggled and went to the kitchenette, where I carefully brewed coffee for the two of us. I placed a cup on the counter in front of where he was sitting.

"Here, for all your hard work."

"Thank you." He beamed.

Currently, I was standing behind the counter and he was sitting in front, which meant that I was looking down at him—an unusual position for me. Feeling like I'd become Holmes, I put down the cup I was holding and asked, "So how did the detective work go?"

"Three requests came in. We were able to solve all of them at once last night, and I've already been paid."

"That's amazing," I said, impressed that he'd solved all of them at the same time.

"I worked until late last night, then went back to the office to take a nap. There were a lot of post-investigation tasks to take care of today, so I lost track of time."

"It must've been a lot of work, with three cases and all."

"Yes. Normally I wouldn't be able to talk about the cases, but everything has been made public this time, so I can tell you."

I leaned closer without thinking. "What were they about?"

Holmes held up his index finger. "First, there was a rumor that ghosts had been appearing in Gion recently."

"Huh? Ghosts?!" I squeaked. I hadn't been expecting that at all.

"Yes, geiko and maiko have been seeing them."

"Ghosts in Gion at night? That's so scary." I felt a chill and hugged myself.

“Wait, but is that something you would ask a detective to solve?” I tilted my head.

“Yes. It’s professional work, but there seemed to be a disagreement over who would put in the request and who would pay for it. It’s not like anyone suffered financial losses, after all.”

“It’s a tough world...”

“There were many people who didn’t believe in ghosts to begin with. So instead of making a formal request, they asked us to simply report if we saw any ghosts while we were doing our other work.” Holmes chuckled.

“You don’t seem bothered. Do you not believe in ghosts at all?”

“No, that’s not true. If we really did see a ghost, I would’ve introduced the client to a specialist.”

“You mean, like, a spirit medium?”

“Yes, or what we call an exorcist or a shaman.”

“Do you know any?”

“Yes. When working with antiques, we sometimes come across something that is possessed by something evil and have to get it exorcized. One such consultation came in just the other day, so I’m thinking of asking a specialist to take care of the suspicious item soon.”

“A suspicious item...” *Is it an antique possessed by a deep-seated grudge?* A chill ran down my spine, and the store suddenly felt colder.

“Oh, and the ghost sightings in Gion were actually the work of students. At first, they were going to take videos of the scared geisha and post them online.”

I was relieved to hear the truth.

“There was an adult involved too. He turned himself in with them. That’s what I was busy with today.”

“That’s good,” I said, placing a hand on my chest. I didn’t like spooky stories about ghosts and grudges. I glanced around the store as I drank my coffee.

“Oh, don’t worry, Aoi. There aren’t any possessed items in this store.”

I nearly spat out my coffee. "Please don't read my mind."

"You're overestimating me again. I only knew because you made it obvious." Holmes laughed cheerfully.

"So what were the other two cases about?"

"A geisha with a stalker and a strange request from a wealthy man."

He gave me a quick summary of the incidents.

After hearing everything, I heaved a sigh. "So the three cases were connected, huh?"

"Yes." He nodded and sipped his coffee. "I'm glad it all ended with the couple reconciling."

"Yeah." I lowered my gaze, feeling conflicted.

"What's the matter, Aoi?"

"Oh, um...I'm worried about what would happen if the husband's memories came back," I murmured quietly.

"Indeed..."

The husband was so in love that he was willing to throw everything away. What would happen if he remembered those feelings? The wife might end up suffering again.

"But even if they did, the person he loved is already married to someone else, right? And their daughter recognizes the other man as her father."

"Yes." Holmes nodded. "Perhaps that is the punishment for his sin of forbidden love. The proprietress, Ayako, seemed to feel bad for him too. I think that's why she gave their daughter the geisha name 'Ichiko.'"

"What do you mean?"

"It's an anagram of 'Koichi.'"

"Oh, I see." *Ayako must've felt bad for the husband because even though it was an unacceptable relationship, she knew his feelings were true.* I looked down again.

“This is their problem to handle, Aoi,” Holmes said gently. “You don’t need to be depressed about it.”

“I know, but it’s sad to think that the husband got married for his family’s sake and met his true love afterwards...”

That said, the one I sympathized with was the wife. I couldn’t help but wonder what I would’ve done in her situation.

“No, I don’t think so at all,” Holmes said flatly, shaking his head.

“Huh?” I blinked.

“A sheltered girl from a wealthy family having an arranged marriage is one thing, but would a grown man really enter an unwanted marriage for the sake of his family’s finances? Shouldn’t he try to work harder on his own first? I suspect he didn’t try very hard and took the easy route of a marriage of convenience. Then he had the nerve to complain that he fell in love with someone afterwards. He was too insincere to everyone involved. If his memories come back and he suffers for it, I’d say he reaped what he sowed,” he said, sipping his coffee.

“Holmes...” *He’s as decisive as ever.*

“That said, Yuka has been suffering for a long time, so I wouldn’t want her to be sad again.”

“Yeah.”

“However, that’s still their problem to deal with.”

“Right...” Even though I’d never met the couple before, I found myself praying that the husband’s memory wouldn’t come back. But as Holmes said, it was their problem, not mine. I tried to change the topic. “Oh right, how was Ensho?”

Holmes sighed. “He’s like a rebellious teenager.”

I thought Ensho had mellowed out a lot, but maybe that wasn’t the case when he was with Holmes.

“Yanagihara didn’t explain the situation to him properly either. He was only told to go to the address and find me.”

“Oh, that would complicate things.” I can see Ensho fighting back against that. It must’ve been tough for both him and Holmes. Actually, it might’ve been Komatsu who had the hardest time of all. My condolences, Komatsu...

I looked at Holmes, who was resting his chin on his hand with a distant look in his eyes.

“But the worst part is that I understand how he feels,” Holmes mumbled softly in his Kyoto accent.

“Huh?” I leaned forward, not quite catching what he said.

“It’s nothing.” He shook his head and laughed weakly. “There are times when even though you sympathize with someone, there’s nothing you can do for them.”

I gave a vague nod, not knowing what he was talking about.

“Oh, right.” He took a clear folder out of his bag. “Would you like to have this?”

There were photos inside the folder. I picked it up, curious, and my eyes widened. “Huh? This is amazing!”

The photos were of expensive tea bowls that you wouldn’t normally be able to see. They were taken from various angles, and even the bottoms of the tea bowls were shown. Most museums didn’t allow photography, and naturally, you couldn’t pick up the display pieces to look at the bottoms. Even though these were only photos, they made for a valuable reference. I’d even consider them a treasure.

“Where did these come from?” I asked.

“When possible, I take photos of the antiques I appraise. They’re all saved on my computer. I thought about them the other day, so I printed them out.”

“Um, can I really have these?” I couldn’t hide my excitement.

“Of course.” He nodded.

“Thank you so much. I can’t believe I get to see such valuable pictures!” I fought back the urge to hug the folder to my chest.

Holmes had been smiling, but he suddenly frowned and sighed.

“What’s wrong?”

“I was just thinking about that rebellious man again.”

“Ensho?”

“Yes.” He shrugged.

Could it be that he prepared these for Ensho? The thought made me a little frustrated. Based on Holmes’s reaction, Ensho hadn’t accepted these photos. I frowned, knowing that Holmes must’ve been concerned.

“It really isn’t easy, huh?”

“Well, I was the one who invited him, so I’ll have to try my best.” He laid his head on the counter.

“Yep, do your best.” I patted him on the head.

He flinched and clenched his fists. “Yes. I feel like I can work forever with that head pat just now,” he said with his face still down.

“There you go again with your exaggerations.” I laughed.

“Oh, right.” He raised his head. “I was going to invite you to dinner today. I was hoping to have a toast with you in honor of my first completed detective job. I found a restaurant in Gion that seems good.”

“Oh!” I clasped my hands together in front of my chest. “I’d love to celebrate with you.”

“Let’s go, then. I’ll help you close shop.”

“Okay.”

We finished draping cloth over the displays, turned off the lights, and left Kura. After locking the door, we held hands and walked south on Teramachi Street.

“Oh, another thing, Aoi.”

“Yes?” I looked up at him.

“Ensho seems to think that we’re always doing naughty things in the store

after closing.”

“What?! He does?!”

“Rude, don’t you think? We only do it occasionally.”

“O-Occasionally? You make it sound like it’s true...”

“But we just did, didn’t we?”

“Huh?”

“We hugged.” He grinned mischievously.

My face heated up in the blink of an eye. *He’s teasing me again.* “You’re as wicked as ever.” I glared at him.

“Who’s the wicked one here?” he murmured in his Kyoto accent, looking away.

And so went Holmes’s first night of solving cases at the Komatsu Detective Agency.

Short Story: The Exorcist and the Appraiser

*

The grandfather clock in the store rang. Holmes, who was sitting behind the counter, looked up from the account book. Since work at the Komatsu Detective Agency usually began at 1 p.m., he sometimes stopped by Kura beforehand to do some paperwork.

“It’s almost time,” he said, slowly standing up. He looked at me as I was cleaning. “Aoi, I’m going to get something from the second-floor storage. If a visitor comes, please attend to them.”

“Okay.” I nodded.

Kura rarely had customers, but that didn’t mean we could leave it empty. I watched Holmes go upstairs and resumed my usual careful dusting.

The doorbell rang and I flinched in surprise. I’d let down my guard, assuming that no one would come at this hour of the morning. Thinking about it, maybe Holmes’s instruction had been because he was planning to have a visitor.

“Welcome,” I said, hurriedly turning around.

“Good day,” replied a smiling young man wearing formal Japanese clothing. He had a very strong Kyoto accent. He had a few things in common with Holmes: namely, his black hair, pale skin, and beautiful face. “Is Kiyotaka present at the moment?” he asked in a relaxed tone, tilting his head slightly and smiling fondly. He gave off a faint scent of plums.

If Holmes was “handsome,” then this man was “beautiful.” Unlike Holmes’s way of speaking, which was gentle yet crisp, his was relaxed and easygoing, like a maiko. “Lovely” was probably the best word to describe it.

“Is something the matter?” he asked, peering into my face as I stood there in a daze.

“Oh, um, Holmes is—”

“Ah, Reito, I was expecting you,” said Holmes, coming down from the second floor with a small wooden box in his hands.

Apparently, the man’s name was Reito. Even his name was lovely.

Holmes placed the box on the end of the counter. “You were at a tea party, I believe?”

“Yes, in Gion. I was attending on my papa’s behalf.”

“Did you walk here from Gion?”

“It’s nice to go for a stroll every now and then.”

“I think you would stand out a lot walking around town dressed like that.”

“People seem to think I’m just an over-eager tourist.”

“No, your demeanor is the embodiment of Kyoto itself.”

“I should be saying that to you.”

I was overwhelmed by the sight of Holmes and Reito chuckling together.
What is this strange power?

“Oh, let’s not stand around. Please have a seat,” said Holmes, gesturing towards a chair.

Reito shook his head. “No need. I’ll take the item and be on my way.”

“Are you in a hurry?”

“No, but the sooner I remove it from here, the better.” He looked at the box on the counter.

“I see. Let me wrap it up for you, then.”

“Oh, I’ll do it,” I said, reaching for the box.

“No,” Reito said flatly.

I flinched and stiffened up. “S-Sorry.” I quickly retracted my hand. *Is he afraid I’ll drop it?* I looked down, feeling sad.

He shook his head lightly and said, “You seem to be very susceptible, so something strange will enter you if you hold that. It’s best not to let women touch it.” He took a cloth from his pocket, held up two fingers in front of the

box, and swiftly wrapped it up.

“Um, what do you mean?” I asked, confused.

Holmes gave me a somber look. “The box contains a comb hair ornament. Someone found it in their storeroom, but bad things kept happening to anyone who used it, so they came to us for help.”

“Oh, is this the ‘suspicious item’ you mentioned before?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “It needs to be exorcized, so I called a specialist.”

“A specialist...” I looked at Reito in surprise. *This must be the exorcist Holmes was talking about. He did say he was going to call one soon...*

The man grinned. “I’m only a helper.” He picked up the cloth-wrapped box. “Ah, this certainly is a dangerous one. It harbors a woman’s hatred for the man who abandoned her and the woman who took him away. She resents the world... How foolish,” he remarked with a scornful smile.

I felt a chill run down my spine.

“The owner doesn’t want to burn it because it’s valuable,” said Holmes, placing his hands on his hips with a sigh.

Reito nodded. “Very well. I will try to get it back to you after the next full moon. Please let them know that.”

“Thank you.”

Unable to follow their conversation, I simply watched them in silence.

“Well then,” said Reito, beginning to turn to leave but stopping in his tracks. “Oh, that’s right. Kiyotaka, I bought some sweets from Sakura-an in Gion. Please share them with the others.” He took out a box from a cherry blossom-patterned paper bag.

“Thank you. I happened to visit Sakura-an the other day. I thought it was a variety store and didn’t know they’d started selling Japanese sweets, so I committed a bit of a faux pas by bringing them yokan from Toraya, but they were happy to receive them.”

“Yoshino loves Toraya, after all. Oh, and I heard that you’re a detective in

Gion now. It sounds like you've been running around a lot."

"Yes, I really have been."

"Would you like to train with us as well?"

"With the Kamo family? Thank you, but I'll pass."

"What a shame."

The two of them chuckled again.

"I'll be going, then. Please give my regards to Seiji."

"Yes, please tell the others I said hello too."

They bowed elegantly to each other, and Reito left the store with a flutter of his kimono sleeves. The door chime rang. It still smelled like plum blossoms, as if a plum spirit had suddenly come and gone. I stood there, trying to make sense of the strange feeling.

"What's the matter?" Holmes asked, looking at me.

My heart skipped a beat at the sight of the handsome face in front of me. "Oh, no, um...that guy was really mysterious and beautiful, wasn't he?" It was as if someone from another world had crossed dimensions to come here. "Does he come often?"

Holmes turned away curtly. "Well, it's rare for possessed items to be brought in, so he really only comes occasionally."

"Possessed items..." I tensed up. The word "possessed" sounded more ominous than "suspicious."

"But from now on, I'll only have him come when you aren't here," he murmured to himself.

"Huh? Why?" I squeaked in confusion.

Holmes looked at me with a disappointed expression and shrugged. "It's nothing. Anyway, I'd better get going." He closed the laptop on the counter and put it in his bag.

I looked at the clock. It was almost time for him to go to work. "Oh, okay. Take care, Holmes." I smiled and waved.

“Oh no,” he said, covering his face with his hand.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, I couldn’t help but feel like we were newlyweds.” He blushed, a mix of embarrassment and joy on his face.

“Huh?!”

“Thank you, Aoi. I’ll see you later.” He patted me on the head and left the store.

Even I could tell how hot my cheeks were. My face was probably bright red.

“I’m more flustered than you,” I muttered, my voice echoing faintly in the quiet store.

Chapter 2: A Symbol of Pride

1

After a long summer break, it was back to university life for me. My part-time job returned to its usual schedule: after school and on weekends when I didn't have anything else planned.

Kura's display window currently featured a flower vase by Yasuyuki Namikawa. It was an autumn-themed piece of cloisonné ware decorated with fall foliage. Born in Kyoto, Yasuyuki Namikawa was a leading cloisonné artist of the Meiji period. His works exhibited amazing technique. The beautiful, delicate design on this vase—which was smaller than a five-hundred-milliliter bottle of water—seemed to depict a vast, endless world. The details were so elaborate that you had to come quite close in order to truly notice them. Because of that, I tried something new for the display.

As I inspected the window, a couple of pedestrians happened to stop in front of it.

“Oh, this is nice. It says it's by Yasuyuki Namikawa.”

“I'm impressed that he could put such a detailed design on such a small vase.”

“Oh, look, they put a magnifying glass here, so you can see it better from this angle.”

“You're right; it looks bigger from here. How considerate of them.”

I secretly did a fist pump when I heard their conversation. They hadn't entered the store, but I was glad that they'd taken an interest in my display.

Holmes, who was checking the inventory, turned around with a smile, clipboard in hand. The Komatsu Detective Agency was closed on weekends unless work came in, so he was at Kura on his days off.

“I'm happy for you, Aoi,” he said.

I coughed. “Seriously, stop reading my mind all the time.”

“It’s your fault for being too easy to read.”

“That’s not true,” I muttered, annoyed.

“By the way, what made you decide to display Yasuyuki Namikawa’s work in September?” he asked, looking at the window.

“When I heard that Ensho started training under you, I suddenly remembered Yasuyuki Namikawa because of the ‘two Namikawas.’”

“Ah, yes. Yasuyuki Namikawa of the west and Sosuke Namikawa of the east.”

“So I actually wanted to display Sosuke Namikawa’s work too, but we don’t have any here,” I explained, looking around the store.

“There might be one in the second-floor storeroom. I’ll check the next time I’m there.”

“Ooh, thanks,” I said before murmuring, “I kind of wanted Ensho to see those two artists’ work.”

Holmes hummed. “You really do have a natural, wonderful sense for these things,” he said with a serious face.

I blinked in surprise. “Huh? No, that’s not...”

“You gave me a very useful hint. You really are amazing, Aoi.”

“You’re giving me too much credit.”

Rikyu, who was sitting on the sofa and reading a book, gave us an annoyed glare. “Hey, could you stop flirting in the store?”

Ever since Holmes had left for his training, Rikyu had been helping out at the shop more. His shifts were mainly when I wasn’t around, though, so we rarely saw each other here.

“We’re not flirting,” I said hastily. “It’s a normal conversation.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He looked back down at his book.

“What are you reading, Rikyu?” Holmes asked.

“*Great Architecture of Kyoto*,” the boy replied with a smile, his expression

completely different from the one he'd directed at me.

"Kingo Tatsuno's Museum of Kyoto, Vories's Bazaar Cafe, Goichi Takeda's Fortune Garden Kyoto, D.C. Greene's Doshisha Chapel, Shigemitsu Matsumuro's Orthodox Church of Kyoto...all of them are brilliant."

"Yeah. Out of those, I like the Museum of Kyoto the most."

"Huh, so the architect behind the Museum of Kyoto was Japanese," I remarked.

The museum was a brick building with a very British appearance. I was familiar with it because it was on Sanjo Street.

"Yeah, Kingo Tatsuno was Josiah Conder's best apprentice," said Rikyu.

"Josiah Conder was an architect from London," Holmes added. "In Japan, he worked on buildings associated with the new government."

"I see." In addition to temples and shrines, Kyoto was home to many historic buildings with unique tastes. "Rikyu wants to become an architect, right?" He'd mentioned it before.

"Hmm..." He tilted his head. "I chose this university so that I could get a first-class architect license, but that doesn't mean my goal is to become an architect. I still don't know what I really want to do. Part of me wants to be like Kiyo, but that doesn't mean I want to be an appraiser either."

"Oh, I see." I gave a small nod.

I could relate because I also looked up to Holmes and wanted to get a curator certification. But unlike Rikyu, I did want to become an appraiser like Holmes.

That raises the question of whether I want to try to work at a museum, but I don't know yet. Helping all day at Kura while honing my appraisal skills sounds appealing, but I also want to go out and experience different things. What do I want to do in the future?

While I was lost in thought, the door chime rang.

Could it be the people who were looking at the display window earlier?

"Welcome," I said with a smile, turning towards the door expectantly. "Oh,

it's you, Akihito."

Akihito looked around, confused. "Huh? Why do you suddenly look so disappointed, Aoi?"

"No, I'm not disappointed." I shook my head, flustered. *Am I really that easy to read?*

Behind me, Holmes and Rikyu chuckled in amusement.

"Oh, Rikyu's here too," remarked Akihito.

"Yeah. Long time no see, Akihito." The boy raised a hand and went back to perusing his book.

"Welcome, Akihito," said Holmes.

"Great; I was hoping you'd be here today, Holmes."

Akihito quickly approached Holmes, who grimaced and pushed the man's forehead away with the palm of his hand.

"You're too close. I'll make coffee, so have a seat," Holmes said, walking behind the counter.

2

Once Holmes's coffee had been distributed to everyone, Akihito spoke up with a meek look on his face. "I came to ask for advice, but first, hear me out, Holmes. It might be over for me." He slumped down over the counter.

"What happened?"

"It's about *Local Rangers*," Akihito began, not bothering to lift his head.

Akihito starred in *Local Rangers*, the second season of which had aired from April to July. Thanks to its rising popularity, a third season had been announced as well.

"What about it? It seems to be doing quite well," said Holmes.

"Yeah." I nodded.

"The ratings are good, yeah. But you see, aside from me, the most popular

rangers are Purple and Yellow.” Akihito raised his head and sighed.

The rangers from the first season were Hokkaido White, Tohoku Green, Kanto Blue, Chubu Purple, and Kansai Yellow. The second season had added Chugoku Red, Shikoku Orange, and Kyushu Pink. Despite the new members, Purple, the beauty from Nagoya, and Yellow, the attractive man from Osaka, remained as popular as ever.

At an event in Hirakata Park, it had been revealed to the public that Purple’s face without makeup was actually very plain. But after that, she was able to take advantage of it and even showed viewers the process behind her transformation. It was quite well received, leading to appearances in fashion magazines for young women and makeup lessons on TV. Meanwhile, Yellow was popular for being an over-the-top Kansai guy who was a good talker, funny, and cool.

Local Rangers’s success came from the main character, Blue (played by Akihito), with Purple and Yellow supporting him on both sides.

“But those super popular members are leaving...”

“Huh? But why?” I asked, bewildered. “Everyone loves them.”

“They weren’t dropped or anything. Both of them have been cast in separate prime time TV dramas, so they’re busier now...and they’ve both decided to move on from *Local Rangers*,” Akihito said, hanging his head.

If this were an idol group, it’d be like if three out of seven members were much more popular and propped up the group, but two of the main three announced that they were leaving to go solo. As a big fan of *Local Rangers*, the news came as a shock to me. I could totally understand why Akihito was depressed.

“That’s a little sad, but there’s nothing you can do about it,” Holmes said nonchalantly.

“Ugh, you really are that kind of guy, huh?”

“That kind of guy?” Holmes tilted his head.

“You’re so coldhearted even though *Local Rangers* is in a crisis. I bet you’re

gonna say, 'If it declines in popularity just because two people are gone, it wasn't anything special to begin with,' right?" Akihito grumbled, picking up his cup.

"I wouldn't say that..."

"What's going to happen with Chubu and Kansai, then?" I asked.

"They're being replaced with new members. Story-wise, Purple's business takes off and she expands to New York. Yellow decides that acting is his true calling after all and goes back to his theater troupe."

"I see."

"Well, nothing I can do. Like they say, all things must pass. I can't stop them from leaving. All I can do is wither away with the people who are left."

It was rare to see Akihito so pessimistic. I didn't know what to say.

"Sorry for whining," he continued. "Anyway, what I wanted advice on wasn't the rangers, but *A Fine Day in Kyoto*," he said cheerfully, trying to brighten the mood. He took a document out of his bag.

"What about it?" Holmes asked. His expression didn't change, but his eyes showed interest.

A Fine Day in Kyoto was a five-minute program where Akihito showcased various places in Kyoto. It was fairly popular and had been running for about three years now. Holmes seemed to like it more than *Local Rangers*—he never missed an episode. Perhaps one of the reasons was that it was only five minutes long, so it didn't take up too much of his time.

"It's been three years, so we've basically gone everywhere already, but there's a twenty-minute special coming up. Where do you think would be good?" Akihito asked, placing the document on the counter.

"Let's see," Holmes said, looking at the paper.

I went beside him to see. The page listed famous places in Kyoto that hadn't been covered yet. *He said they've gone everywhere, but there are still so many places left. Kyoto really is rich in culture.*

"Come to think of it, you haven't covered Heian Shrine yet," Holmes

remarked, pointing at the name in the list.

“Nope.”

“That’s surprising,” I said, finding it strange. “You covered so many well-known places early on in the show, but you haven’t gone to a place as famous as Heian Shrine?”

“Pretty much.” Akihito folded his hands behind his head. “It came up a bunch of times, but I never felt like doing it.”

Holmes blinked. “Why is that?”

Akihito looked puzzled as to how to answer. “Why? Well, I mean...sure, Heian Shrine is big and grand and all, and it has a huge torii gate. I used to like it too. But it wasn’t built until the Meiji era, so it doesn’t have much history, right? After meeting you and going to places with a long history like Nanzen-ji Temple and Tofuku-ji Temple, new temples and shrines just don’t move me anymore.” He shrugged and rested his chin on his hand.

“I can’t believe you,” Holmes said with an exasperated sigh. “You should at least...”

“A-At least what?” Akihito asked hesitantly.

“No, never mind. When it comes to you, seeing is believing. Do you have time today?”

“Yeah, the only thing I have scheduled today is a late-night radio show in Osaka. I’m free until then.”

“In that case, let’s go to Heian Shrine right now.”

“Huh?!” Akihito exclaimed in disbelief.

“Rikyu, I’m sorry, but you’ll have to watch the store. I’m taking Aoi and Akihito to Heian Shrine,” Holmes said as he unbuttoned his black vest.

“What?!” This time, it was Rikyu whose shocked voice echoed through the shop.

Deciding to head to Heian Shrine by car, the three of us went to the underground parking lot on Oike Street and got into the company car.

Upon reaching surface level, Akihito, who was sitting alone in the back seat, said, "I still think having a Jaguar for a company car is something a rich guy with austere taste would do." He folded his hands behind his head and chuckled.

"It's my grandfather's preference," replied Holmes, the driver.

"So the next time you buy a new car, will it be a Jaguar again?"

Holmes tilted his head. "I'm not sure. These days, Jaguar cars no longer have the emblem as a hood ornament, do they?"

Sitting in the passenger seat, I craned my neck to look at the front of the car. The leaping jaguar on the hood did have a powerful sense of presence. It was considered the brand's symbol.

"Now that you mention it, yeah," said Akihito. "And it's not just Jaguars. I feel like other luxury cars are getting rid of the hood mascots too."

"My grandfather said, 'The whole point of Jaguars is the jaguar on the hood! I'll never like a Jaguar that doesn't have a jaguar!' So his next car might be something else."

I imagined the owner saying that and couldn't help but laugh. I absentmindedly looked out the window and realized that Holmes was driving west. "Um, isn't Heian Shrine in the other direction?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Yes. I thought I'd take the opportunity to also show you two the Museum of Kyoto that Rikyu was talking about earlier."

From Oike Street, Holmes merged south onto Sakaimachi Street and then turned right at Sanjo Street. The brick Museum of Kyoto building soon came into view. Since there weren't any cars around us, he drove slowly.

"I've been here so many times, but it still strikes me how modern the building is," I remarked.

"This might be my first time taking a good look at it," said Akihito, looking outside as if he were glued to the window. "It sure is stylish."

"This annex was originally built as a bank in the Meiji period," explained

Holmes.

“Ohh.”

“At the time—as in after the Meiji Restoration—Kyoto was in a desolate state, rife with vacant lots and houses. However, that empty land was used to build a new shopping street which we all know well: Shinkyogoku. Thanks to that, the intersecting Sanjo Street sprang to life as well. The Bank of Japan had its Kyoto branch built here on Sanjo Street. Designed by Tatsuno, the beautiful British-style building, with its harmonious combination of red bricks and horizontal white granite stripes, must have been a great source of encouragement for the people of Kyoto at the time,” Holmes explained passionately.

“Encouragement?”

Akihito and I looked at each other through the rearview mirror and tilted our heads.

4

From there, we changed course and headed east towards Okazaki. After parking in Okazaki Park’s underground parking lot and coming back up to the surface, we were greeted by a towering torii gate that overwhelmed everyone who set eyes on it. The vermilion color looked dazzling against the blue sky.

Akihito grinned happily and spread his arms out. “It really is huge, huh?”

Holmes and I looked at each other, then at Akihito.

“What is it, guys? You look like you wanna say something.”

“You were complaining about its short history, but now you’re radiating an ‘I love Heian Shrine’ aura,” I replied with a giggle.

“She’s right,” said Holmes.

“Like I said, I used to like it. When I was a kid, my family would come here and then go to the zoo afterwards.”

Right next to Heian Shrine was the Kyoto City Zoo. Because of that, a lot of parents brought their kids to this neighborhood, giving it a homey, peaceful

atmosphere.

I saw a young couple pushing a stroller and my heart beat a little faster as I thought about my own future.

“Oh yeah, how’s it going at Komatsu’s agency?” Akihito asked.

“It’s been all right.”

“Is there even any work to do?”

As usual, the actor had no sense of tact.

“After solving a minor issue in Gion, we’ve had some more requests trickle in, but it’s all common things, like investigating unfaithful partners, background checks on people’s fiancés, and looking for lost pets.”

“Sure sounds mundane.” Akihito laughed. “Ensho’s with you too, right? Are you guys all right together? You used to be rivals, but now you’re both in lo—” He suddenly flinched and stopped talking.

What’s wrong? I looked at him and asked, “Both in what?”

He panicked and said, “Uh, you know, they’re both in the same field. But they get along like cats and dogs.”

“Oh, yeah.” I nodded with a frown. “I’m worried about their rocky relationship too.”

Holmes smiled gently and said, “It’s fine. I teach Ensho about antiques when I have time, and he’s actually quite obedient during lessons. He doesn’t seem enthusiastic about the detective work, but he still does it without issue.”

Ensho was the dexterous type, so I could imagine him being a competent worker.

“You two might actually make a good combination,” I murmured.

“Wh-What do you mean?! *I’m* Holmes’s partner!” Akihito exclaimed, putting his hands on Holmes’s shoulders.

I was taken aback, as were the people around us who turned to look at them. I saw a schoolgirl blushing as well.

“I don’t consider you *or* Ensho my ‘partner.’ Sorry,” Holmes said with a smile,

grabbing Akihito's wrist and pulling it off his shoulder.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" The actor hurriedly withdrew his hands and rubbed them, teary-eyed. "Man, you're as cold as ever. Oh, wait, I get it. We aren't partners; we're best friends." He put his arm around Holmes's shoulder without hesitation. The man had a mind of steel.

Unsurprisingly, a few seconds later, he was screaming in pain again. This time, his arm had been twisted upwards.

"Owww!"

"Good grief. You never learn your lesson," Holmes said with a sincerely exasperated sigh. But even as he let go of the poor man's arm, he didn't deny the words "best friends."

Akihito seemed to notice as well. He seemed somewhat happy as he replied, "You're so mean."

For Holmes, who had a hard time opening up to people, an honest guy like Akihito probably made him feel at ease.

"I'm one of the few friends you have, so you should treat me better," the actor continued. "Wait, do you even have any other friends?" he asked with a straight face.

I gave him a strained smile. He really never hesitated to ask rude questions.

Holmes didn't seem bothered, though. "I do have some friends from school whom I socialize with," he replied nonchalantly.

"Oh yeah, you do have good looks, after all."

"Akihito..." My face stiffened.

Suddenly, I remembered Keigo Kohinata, who was definitely one of Holmes's "school friends." He had been interested in my best friend, Kaori. *I wonder how things went between them?*

"Speaking of which, has Kohinata been doing well?" I asked.

Holmes tilted his head. "I haven't been talking to him, so I don't know."

"Oh." I looked down.

“Are you curious about Kaori?” he asked. He knew about them as well.

“Yes...”

“That reminds me; how has Kaori been?”

“She’s been doing well.” Her relationship had ended, but she hadn’t seemed to stay depressed for long. She even seemed a bit more mature than before.

“Oh, right, Kaori studied abroad in Australia over summer break. She said she wanted to learn more about foreign languages.”

“Oh? That’s wonderful.”

“I wouldn’t have expected that from someone whose family runs a kimono fabrics shop,” Akihito murmured.

“Well, she isn’t inheriting the store,” I replied. “Although Miyashita Kimono Fabrics does seem to have a lot of foreign customers.”

“I’m sure they do,” said Holmes.

“Hey, did it make you want to study abroad too, Aoi?” asked Akihito.

I blushed a little, because it really had. Just like when Holmes had gone overseas for training, when I’d heard that my best friend was going to study abroad, I’d felt a strange sense of urgency. I’d even gotten a passport despite not having any travel plans—which would later come in handy in an unexpected way, but that’s a story for another time.

“Now then, let’s go inside,” said Holmes, looking up.

We climbed the stone stairs and passed through the two-story gate, which—like the torii gate—was massive and a brilliant vermilion. This brought us inside the shrine grounds. To the west was a statue of Byakko, the white tiger, which doubled as a water basin for purifying the hands and mouth, and to the east was a statue of Seiryu, the azure dragon. The grand main building was still far in the distance, and we could also see the Byakko Tower and the Seiryu Tower on either side of it. The sheer size of the shrine was incredible.

“Man, I haven’t been here in ages. Coming here really makes you feel like you traveled back in time, huh?” Akihito remarked.

“Yeah, it does.” I nodded. “That’s why people call it a recreation of Heian-kyo.” Heian-kyo was the name Kyoto had gone by when it was the capital of Japan.

“Yes, Heian Shrine’s main building is said to be a recreation of Heian-kyo’s Heian Palace at around five-eighths the size,” Holmes explained with ease.

“You really know everything,” Akihito replied with a laugh. “A recreation of Heian-kyo, huh? Even though it has a short history, it sure feels overwhelming when you see it like this,” he said with a passionate sigh.

Holmes gave an exasperated shrug. “You’ve said several times now that Heian Shrine has a ‘short history.’ What on earth do you mean by that?”

Akihito made a confused face. “Huh? For Kyoto, the Meiji Restoration is considered recent, isn’t it? You of all people should know that.”

I found Holmes’s question surprising as well. Kyoto prided itself on its history, and it felt like the older a building or company was, the higher its status. Like if you said, “My house was built in the Taisho period,” you’d get someone scoffing at you and saying, “Well, mine was built in Eiroku.” Not that I’d ever encountered someone like that in real life, though.

“Having a long history is indeed impressive, but Heian Shrine is important to the residents of Kyoto in a way that’s unrelated to time,” insisted Holmes.

“Huh? What do you mean?” asked Akihito.

Wondering the same thing, I looked at Holmes.

“Heian Shrine was built to commemorate the 1,100th anniversary of Kyoto’s initial establishment as the capital of Japan, and it enshrines Emperor Kanmu, who ruled at the time of the capital’s relocation,” he explained slowly as we walked. “Then the Meiji Restoration had the capital moved to Tokyo, and Kyoto quickly deteriorated. The once glorious city faded into the background, and the decline was so drastic that it made one want to avert their eyes.”

I gulped. I couldn’t even imagine Kyoto in such a state.

“Throughout the ages, our country has relocated its capital many times. The people of Kyoto knew this, so they were aware of what would happen to the

city.”

The capital had moved from Heijo-kyo to Nagaoka-kyo and then Heian-kyo before finally leaving the west for a land in the far east. It was easy to imagine that those with foresight and those wanting to do business would have followed it to Tokyo, while the people left in Kyoto would have been in despair because their hometown was doomed.

“However, the people living in Kyoto didn’t lose heart,” Holmes continued.

Akihito and I, who had been casting our eyes down, looked up.

“They rose up and said, ‘We can’t let things stay like this.’ Bringing their hearts together, they built this enormous shrine as a recreation of Heian-kyo. It was a culmination of their pride, zeal, and determination—a way of declaring, ‘Kyoto will never wither away.’ That’s what Heian Shrine represents,” Holmes said in a firm tone of voice, looking up at the shrine’s main building.

Akihito and I were lost for words. At a time when their city could’ve been headed downhill, the people of Kyoto had built a beautiful, overwhelmingly huge shrine to inspire everyone to keep the city running as if it were still the capital.

Kyoto people have a joke that goes, “We’re only letting Tokyo hold on to the capital for now.” At the time of the relocation, the phrase might’ve been their best attempt at putting on a brave front. But it must’ve been because of this shrine that they were able to bluff in the first place.

I felt a surge of emotion, and tears welled up in my eyes.

“So its short history has nothing to do with it,” Holmes continued. “It’s because of Heian Shrine that Kyoto is still prosperous to this day.”

Akihito turned away and rubbed his eyes. He must’ve been filled with indescribable feelings as well.

“So, Akihito, you can’t give up either,” Holmes said, gently placing a hand on the actor’s shoulder.

“Huh?” Akihito turned around, confused.

“You may have lost two important rangers, but you still have yourself and the

other members. All you have to do is make things so exciting with the new cast that those two will regret moving on,” Holmes said with a smile.

Akihito’s eyes instantly misted over with tears. “Holmes...”

“Please don’t make such a pathetic face.”

“I seriously wanna hug you right now. Aoi, can I?”

“Um, go ahead,” I replied.

“I’ll pass,” said Holmes. “More importantly, wipe your face.” Exasperated, he handed Akihito his handkerchief.

“So basically, you’re telling me to hug you *after* I’ve wiped my face?”

“I’m telling you to stand on your own two feet,” Holmes snapped.

Akihito laughed cheerfully and straightened his back. “Yeah...I’ll have confidence in myself, with a heart as big as Heian Shrine.”

“That’s the spirit.” Holmes smiled gently. “Now then, let’s pay our respects.”

Akihito and I nodded and followed him.

I did like Heian Shrine before, but after hearing that story, it feels special to me now. Since I was thinking about my future, I’m glad that I got to come here and listen to Holmes’s explanation. I’m sure I’m going to go through a lot, and like Akihito, I’ll have times when I want to give up. When I’m faced with those difficulties, I’ll come here.

I looked up at Heian Shrine, which had been the emotional support for the people of Kyoto who held their heads high amidst despair. Just like them, I wanted to come here to receive energy from this beautiful, grand shrine.

I smiled brightly as I watched Holmes and Akihito walk in front of me with cheerful looks on their faces.

Chapter 3: Pandora's Box

1

After solving the cases of the geiko's stalker, Koichi Takatsuji's fall down the stairs, and the ghost sightings, the Komatsu Detective Agency became rather well known in Gion, and they were now getting requests every now and then. In addition to the typical infidelity investigations and lost pets, there were also inquiries from the Gion Peace Society. Thanks to Kiyotaka's expertise and Ensho's reluctant assistance, the cases were usually solved in no time at all.

Perhaps it was because of their stellar reputation that such a strange request came in on this day. It was the beginning of a series of events. I'd always thought that Kyoto had a strong web of connections—that it felt like a small world—and these incidents made that incredibly clear.

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"I want you to decipher the password to open this box," said the client, unwrapping a cloth package. He was Sakichi Sumikawa (age 45), a man who ran several restaurants in Gion, including a luxurious traditional Japanese one.

Inside the cloth wrapper was a sturdy-looking antique iron box. It was large enough to be held with two hands, and it had a ten-letter combination lock. In other words, it was probably a metal safe. The color had faded quite a bit.

"Oh?" remarked Kiyotaka, who was sitting across from the client. "It's quite an old safe, isn't it?"

"Yes." Sakichi nodded. "My grandfather left it to me."

Ensho, who was sitting next to Kiyotaka, looked down at the safe, seeming as uninterested as ever. "Doesn't look easy. Why'd you come to us? Can't you just ask a locksmith?"

Komatsu, who was watching from his desk, gave a strained smile. *You're right, but don't say that out loud.*

“I thought so too, but my mother said she would rather ask you than someone she doesn’t know.”

“Does your mother know us?” asked Kiyotaka.

“Not directly, but she lives in Gion, and she heard some trustworthy people from the Gion Peace Society say that the Komatsu Detective Agency is reliable. She also heard that Seiji Yagashira’s grandson is here. According to the rumors, he’s very sharp and people call him the Holmes of Kyoto.”

Komatsu hummed.

“I’m honored,” Kiyotaka said with a smile.

“This is the letter my grandfather left me.” Sakichi took an envelope out of his bag and put it on the table.

Kiyotaka immediately put on a pair of white gloves and said, “Allow me to take a look, then.” He pulled a piece of paper out of the envelope. Both the envelope and the paper were faded and looked very old.

I am writing this letter before going to the battlefield. Since it is you, I can tell you that I believe World War II was a complete failure. I do not think I will be able to return safely. Thus, I have decided to leave you this letter.

Buried deep underneath the living room is something I have left for you. I have enclosed a cipher with this letter. You should be able to solve it. Please make use of what is inside to support you for the rest of your life.

Note that the safe is custom-made by a craftsman. If you try to force it open or enter an incorrect password more than three times, the contents of the safe will be destroyed. I would rather make it worthless than give it to someone other than you.

I wish you happiness from the bottom of my heart.

“My grandfather’s bad premonition came true. He never returned from the war.” Sakichi sighed.

“My condolences. Now, what is the cipher mentioned in the letter?”

“Here, this is it.” Sakichi took a clear folder from his bag and handed it over. It contained a piece of faded, light brown paper.

“Thank you.” Kiyotaka accepted the folder and looked down at the cipher. It consisted of three rows’ worth of worm-like letters that resembled a curly number “3” or a cursive “E.”

“Wh-What’s that?” Komatsu stood up and leaned in for a better look.

Ensho frowned and squinted at the text, but said nothing.

“Eighty-seven letters,” murmured Kiyotaka, who had apparently been counting the squiggly letters.

“The letter was addressed to my mother, but she couldn’t figure it out either,” Sakichi said in a disappointed tone.

Komatsu made a mental note: *This safe was left by the client’s grandfather to his mother.*

Kiyotaka looked up and tilted his head slightly. “Did your mother receive this letter before your grandfather went to war?”

“He actually didn’t give it to her in person. It was tucked in the back of a drawer, and she found it about twenty-five years ago.”

“Twenty-five years? Have you not tried to open the safe at all since then?”

“We did try, of course. But it says the contents will break if you try to force it open, so we couldn’t be rash. Before we knew it, it’d been set aside and forgotten about. I just remembered it the other day. My mother is getting old, so I want to show her the treasure my grandfather left her.”

“I see.”

Ensho hummed and looked at Sakichi. He seemed to be a bit interested now. “What’s inside, by the way?” he asked.

The client shook his head. “My mother doesn’t know either.”

Kiyotaka touched the safe with his gloved hands. “It’s quite sturdy,” he said with a troubled smile. “Well then, I’d like to get started on carefully deciphering the code, but I think it will take some time. Would you be able to leave the safe, letter, and cipher with us?”

Sakichi’s face stiffened. “Oh...no, I can’t do that. You can photocopy the

cipher and let me know if you solve it. I'll pay you when you do."

"Understood. Let me copy it, then."

Kiyotaka photocopied the cipher and returned it to the client, who hurriedly put it back in the folder and packed up the other items.

"Well, thank you," said Sakichi. He went to leave the office but stopped. "Oh, right, there was one more thing I wanted your help with."

"It would be our pleasure," Kiyotaka replied with a smile.

*

When Sakichi was gone, Kiyotaka and Ensho exchanged looks.

"That guy was a real liar, eh?"

"Indeed."

"He knows what the treasure is, and it's probably worth a pretty penny."

"It appears so. And if it were to break, its value would no doubt collapse. Most of all, that one thing gave it away from the start."

"What thing?"

"Didn't you notice?" Kiyotaka chuckled.

"What the heck are you on about?" Ensho clicked his tongue, annoyed.

"Anyway, did you figure out the cipher, kiddo?" asked Komatsu.

Ensho gave Kiyotaka a mocking glance. "Oh yeah, you're a cryptography expert."

"That would be you, wouldn't it?"

"I can't solve 'em unless I know the creator well."

"Right, because you're the channeling type." Kiyotaka looked down at the copy of the cipher. "I suspect that this is the same as Elgar's cipher."

"Elgar? As in the composer?" asked Komatsu.

"The *Pomp and Circumstance* guy, right?"

"Yes." Kiyotaka nodded, checked something on his phone, and smiled. "I was

right. This is Elgar's cipher. Elgar liked riddles—for example, his piece *Variations on an Original Theme* includes three-letter initials, people's names, and mysterious symbols. It was commonly referred to as the *Enigma Variations*."

"Enigma, eh?" Ensho smiled wryly and shrugged.

"Nostalgic, isn't it?" Holmes chuckled. "This cipher was addressed to a woman named Dora Penny. However, neither cryptanalysts nor Elgar researchers have been able to crack it yet. In other words, it's an unsolved cipher."

"Huh?" Komatsu's and Ensho's eyes widened.

"What the heck are we supposed to do, then?" retorted Ensho.

"Why would Sakichi ask us to solve this?" asked Komatsu.

"Why indeed?" Kiyotaka smiled in amusement.

"Well, do you think you can do it, kiddo?"

"I think solving Elgar's cipher would be impossible, but as for this password, I might be able to figure it out if I can learn the background of the person who created it. But as things stand, I'm not particularly inclined to do so." Kiyotaka sighed.

"Why not?" Komatsu tilted his head. He had no idea what Kiyotaka was talking about.

"For now, let me put this case on hold," said Kiyotaka, looking at the clock. "Oh! It's already getting late. We should head out soon. Now would be a good time to take care of the *other* request."

Komatsu looked at the clock. It was past 8:30 p.m. "You're right."

He and Ensho stood up and got ready to leave.

2

When they went outside, the sun had already set. Gion's streets were just as busy as they had been in the day, with people of all ages and genders coming and going. Some of them were locals, while others were tourists from other parts of Japan and even abroad. Perhaps due to Gion's culture, there were

many people wearing kimono, giving the place a charismatic atmosphere.

Komatsu, Kiyotaka, and Ensho walked leisurely through Gion. Kiyotaka was dressed in his usual simple attire consisting of a jacket and jeans. Ensho was wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and a cap. The two men were opposite types, but both were eye-catchingly attractive. Women passing by would stop and turn to look at them.

After walking for a while, three young women came up to them, giggling.

“Hello there, gentlemen.”

“Are you free?”

“Wanna go to karaoke with us?”

They looked like normal university students and were wearing things like simple dresses and jeans—cute without being too gaudy.

Komatsu shot Kiyotaka a glance. Kiyotaka gave a subtle nod and smiled.

“Why, we’d love to. The three of us have more time than we know what to do with,” he said in his Kyoto accent.

“It’s a pleasure to be invited to karaoke by such cute girls,” Ensho added.

They’re like completely different people, thought Komatsu as he goggled at them.

The girls pumped their fists happily.

“Yay!”

“Let’s go!”

“Oh, you’re invited too, of course, mister.”

“Thanks,” Komatsu said with a small bow.

One of the women leaned close to Kiyotaka and said, “Hey, hot stuff, are you good at singing?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m ‘hot stuff,’ and no, I’m laughably bad at singing.”

“What? You seem like you’d be really good.”

“The big guy over there looks like he’d be good too,” another woman chimed

in.

“I’m all right,” replied Ensho. “Well, I’m better than ‘hot stuff’ over there.”

“There you go again,” Kiyotaka groaned.

“Oh no, do you guys not get along?”

“Are the two gentlemen competing?”

Komatsu watched his two temporary employees laugh along with the women and thought, *They go too well together.*

As his face stiffened, the other woman shyly approached him and said, “I’m into way older men. Can I stay with you?” She looked up at him with shining eyes.

Komatsu gulped. “S-Sure, go ahead,” he replied awkwardly.

“Thanks!” She blushed and linked arms with him.

The group went into a karaoke shop. After spending around an hour there, the women cheerfully pulled the men by the hand.

“Wanna go somewhere else?”

“We know a good place.”

“Let’s drink some more.”

Komatsu, Kiyotaka, and Ensho stealthily exchanged looks before smiling.

“Yes, that’s a good idea.”

“Yeah, I’d rather take our time drinking than keep singing.”

“Same.”

They stood up and let the women lead them to the next place.

“You guys are all good singers.”

“Yeah, even though you made us expect the worst.”

“Oh, but I’m surprised that Komatsu is the best singer!”

The women continued their chattering as they opened the door to their shop of choice. It seemed like a casual bar from the outside, but upon going in, it

turned out that the interior was designed more like a club.

“We actually work here, you see.”

“We’re going to get changed, so go ahead and start drinking.”

“Let’s talk a lot later, okay?”

They winked and blew kisses as they started to leave.

“Wait!” Komatsu exclaimed. “Isn’t this place expensive?”

“Nah.” The women shook their heads.

“Don’t worry. It’s only about five thousand yen per person.”

“We’ll be right back, okay?”

“See you!”

They disappeared into the back of the club.

As soon as they were out of sight, Komatsu heaved a sigh and leaned back.

“So they really were bait, huh? I thought they might’ve been normal girls.” He let out another sigh, unable to get over the disappointment.

Next to him, Kiyotaka gave him an exasperated look. “What are you talking about? They looked like bait from the very beginning. The way they interacted with us and closed the distance was absolutely business-like.”

“Yeah,” Ensho agreed. “They looked at us like they were looking at money.”

“Money?” Komatsu repeated, startled.

Kiyotaka chuckled. “Ah, that’s a good way to put it. Yes, those were the eyes of people looking at money.”

“Right?”

“Indeed. I could also sense desperation in them, although they were trying to hide it. They might have a strict quota.”

“Yeah, but it sure was fresh seeing you flirt with girls with your accent on full display. That’s how you’ve been picking them up, eh?”

“No, I’m nowhere near as skilled as you.”

“Says you. Poor Aoi, falling into the hands of someone like you.”

“What do you mean by that?” Kiyotaka maintained his smile, but the look in his eyes suddenly turned razor-sharp.

“Your mood always does a one-eighty when it comes to her, eh? Scary stuff.” Ensho shrugged.

“Hey, let’s save the tensions for somewhere else, guys.” Komatsu sighed. He felt like he’d gotten pretty used to their little skirmishes.

After a while, the women came back after changing their clothes. They were each wearing open-backed cocktail dresses in different colors: pink, white, and silver. They clung to the three men and looked up at them, batting their eyelashes.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“Did you miss us?”

“Hey, what do you wanna drink?”

Komatsu averted his gaze. Even though he knew it was a trap, he couldn’t stop his heart from beating faster.

“I’ll have a beer,” said Kiyotaka.

“Beer? I recommend the wine. Especially the red one.”

“Let’s go with that, then.”

When the wine arrived, the group of six raised their glasses and drank.

After almost an hour of drinking, Komatsu looked at his watch and said, “All right, we should get going.”

“Yes, we should,” replied Kiyotaka.

“Yeah,” agreed Ensho.

As they got ready to leave, the women lamented, “Aww, so soon?” However, they also signaled to a man in a black suit to bring the bill.

When the bill came, Komatsu’s eyes widened. He had known what to expect, but the number still shocked him. “Th-Three hundred thousand yen? Did they

add an extra zero?”

Next to him, Ensho laughed and said, “Now that’s a textbook case.”

Kiyotaka looked completely unfazed. “Since it was described as a clip joint, I wondered how much they would overcharge. This is it?” he murmured softly.

“Damn rich kids,” Ensho grumbled.

“Sorry, but I’m gonna have to agree with Ensho this time.” Komatsu gave Kiyotaka a cold look. “You don’t consider this price a rip-off, kiddo?”

“I never said that.” Kiyotaka regained his composure and looked at his coworkers. “Well, let’s begin.”

Komatsu nodded and thought back to Sakichi Sumikawa’s second request. Sakichi had a cousin named Hiroki Tadokoro, who was like a younger brother to him. Hiroki had opened a restaurant in Gion in recent years, but it hadn’t gone well, so he’d changed it into a bar. However, perhaps the bar hadn’t worked out either—Sakichi had recently heard a rumor that it had sunk to the level of a scam club.

“When I ask him about it, he plays dumb. Could you get some evidence for me? He’s a family member, so I want to give him a stern talking-to before the police get involved. You can go as hard as you want.”

Some research had revealed that the club’s M.O. was to have their female employees dress up like university girls and pick up guys, using karaoke and whatnot to make them drop their guard. Then they’d invite them to the club for more drinks. That’s why Komatsu, Ensho, and Kiyotaka had been wandering the streets of Gion in an attempt to look like easy marks. After successfully being caught, it was now time for the confrontation.

Kiyotaka stood up straight and stared down the man in the black suit. “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid we can’t pay this amount.”

Everyone around them fell silent.

The man, perhaps used to such refusals, immediately went to the back of the club and fetched the owner: Hiroki Tadokoro, the client’s cousin. He looked to be in his early forties and was wearing an expensive-looking suit. He seemed

like a businessman at first glance.

Hiroki smiled apologetically and narrowed his eyes behind his glasses. “That’s our establishment’s price, so you’re going to have to pay it.”

“Except, those ladies told us it would cost about five thousand per person,” Kiyotaka replied.

“You must’ve misheard. They said it would ‘start from’ five thousand per person.”

“No, I’m sure they said ‘about five thousand yen per person.’”

“Do you have proof?” Hiroki grinned.

“Yes, I do.” Kiyotaka took his phone out of his pocket and held it up.

“Wait! Isn’t this place expensive?”

“Don’t worry. It’s only about five thousand yen per person.”

Komatsu’s conversation with the employee played from the phone speakers.

Hiroki adjusted his glasses, not bothering to hide his frown. “You were recording that?”

“Sorry, it’s in my nature to be cautious.”

“The five thousand yen is the base fee.”

“Don’t you think that should be explained to the customers?”

“My apologies. I’ll talk to our staff to avoid future misunderstandings.” Hiroki maintained his confident smile.

“So, the total came out to three hundred thousand. But we only had two glasses of wine each, didn’t we?”

“The wine the girls recommended was very expensive.”

“What was the brand?”

“Romanée-Conti.”

“Romanée-Conti?” Kiyotaka’s eyes widened. “That would indeed be very expensive.”

Hiroki nodded happily. "That's right."

"Could you show us the bottle?" Kiyotaka asked in a firm tone.

The owner signaled to the man in the black suit, who nodded and brought over the empty wine bottle. It was a dark color with a white label that said "ROMANÉE-CONTI."

"This is the bottle you drank," Hiroki said with a triumphant face.

Kiyotaka burst out laughing, seemingly not on purpose.

"What's so funny?"

"I'm sorry. I was just excited to see something so rare. However, in this case, isn't the bill too low?" Kiyotaka picked up the three-hundred-thousand-yen bill and chuckled.

"What?" Hiroki frowned.

"Romanée-Conti is the name of a high-grade Pinot noir vineyard in Vosne-Romanée, a village in Burgundy, as well as the red wine made from that vineyard's grapes. Vosne-Romanée is nicknamed 'the village loved by God' for its ideal soil that absorbs minerals in the earth and has great exposure to sunlight. Romanée-Conti is defined by these perfect conditions, and it is said that only six thousand bottles are produced per year. Even a non-vintage bottle will cost over a million yen. Good years will often go for two or three million. If this really was Romanée-Conti, then you wouldn't possibly sell it to us for this price."

"I-Is that so? Well, we do honest business here," Hiroki replied with a defiant smile.

Kiyotaka snickered. "Sorry, could I borrow that bottle for a second?" he asked as he put on his white gloves.

The owner hesitantly handed him the bottle.

"Oh dear. I never expected to come across something like this here. Take a look, Ensho. It's not an antique, but it's still educational."

"Huh?" Ensho and Komatsu's eyes widened.

“Forgeries can even be made of expensive wines. We don’t have a genuine bottle here, so we can’t compare them, but the orthodox method of determining authenticity is by looking at the color of the bottle. This one is dark, but bottles from the nineties onward are nearly pitch-black. It’s to prevent the quality of the wine from being affected by outside light. You could find this bottle’s level of darkness anywhere.”

Hiroki’s face turned pale, while Komatsu and Ensho hummed.

“Also, most genuine bottles of Romanée-Conti have green letters under the brand’s logo. This label doesn’t have those, which means it was most likely not produced according to Romanée-Conti’s standard. Next, please look at the crescent-shaped label on the shoulder of the bottle.”

The label he was referring to said “MONOPOLE 2015.”

“This is called the monopole label and it indicates the year of the wine. However, the label on a genuine bottle would have uniform margins, unlike this one. Also, as with antique tea bowls, the bottom means everything.” Kiyotaka showed Ensho the bottom of the bottle, which looked like any other wine bottle and had no special characteristics. “This doesn’t apply to vintage ones, but recent Romanée-Conti bottles have the letters ‘DRC’ on the bottom.”

“What do they look like?” asked Ensho.

“They’re embossed. Forgeries don’t have that.”

“Oh, that’s interesting.” The apprentice seemed impressed.

“We have a genuine bottle at home, so I’ll show you next time.”

Ensho’s eyes instantly turned cold. “You really are a rich kid.”

“It’s my grandfather’s treasure. He doesn’t let me drink it.”

“But you’ve had it before, haven’t you?”

“I’ve had a little bit...but more importantly,” Kiyotaka brushed Ensho off and turned to Hiroki, “I went on a bit of a tangent there, but you were listening, right? This is fake, so we can’t pay you that amount.”

“Well, I’m shocked too. I purchased it thinking it was real. The price on the bill is the price we charge based on that, so would you be able to pay it?” Hiroki

forced a smile onto his stiff face.

“So it’s come to lousy excuses? I’m sure the famous Romanée-Conti was the only expensive wine you could think of, right? You even prepared such a flimsy forgery. I feel as if I’m looking at ignorance made flesh. It’s embarrassing to think that someone like you is a business owner.”

“What the hell, you bastard!” Hiroki grabbed Kiyotaka by the collar and punched him in the face. Kiyotaka fell to the floor.

Hiroki looked down at him and laughed, “Hah! All bark and no bite, huh?!”

Suddenly, there was the sound of a camera shutter. Startled, Hiroki turned around and saw that Komatsu had been filming the entire exchange.

Kiyotaka put his hand on his bruised cheek and murmured, “Getting people riled up isn’t easy” as he slowly got up. “Now, in addition to the overcharging, we’ve established an assault case. The police consider rip-offs a civil matter that they won’t intervene in, but physical assault is a different story.”

“Huh?” Hiroki froze, his face pale.

“However, we would also like to avoid getting the police involved.”

“Is it money you want?”

“No, as someone who loves this town, I would like you to reform your practices. If you continue to do these things, I have no intention of remaining lenient.” Kiyotaka turned his back to Hiroki. Sakichi had only asked them to teach his cousin a lesson.

“What the hell?” Hiroki muttered, dumbfounded. Then his eyes widened as if he’d realized something. “Oh, did Sakichi ask you to do this? That’s what this is, right? Dammit, he’s getting in my way again!”

This time, Hiroki really snapped. He picked up a nearby chair and swung it at Kiyotaka’s back. Kiyotaka quickly turned around to defend himself, but Ensho had already tripped Hiroki. The club owner fell to the floor, still holding the chair.

“Thank you,” said Kiyotaka, looking at Ensho in surprise. “I wouldn’t have expected you to save me.”

Facing away, Ensho replied, "I really can't stand you, but this guy made me realize that it pisses me off more when someone else hits you. If you're gonna get hit, I wanna be the one doing it."

Kiyotaka chuckled. "You sure are twisted."

"I don't wanna hear that from you."

The other customers were looking at them in shock.

Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and gave a slight bow. "We're very sorry for the commotion. We'll be taking our leave now."

The other customers hurriedly stood up and started preparing to leave, saying things like, "This place is a rip-off?" and "I was about to be scammed!"

The employees panicked and tried to stop them.

"No, wait!"

"Don't worry!"

However, the customers pushed the women's hands away and swarmed outside, thinking this was their only chance to escape.

Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho looked at each other, shrugged, and left the club.

*

"I didn't think it'd go exactly as planned," Komatsu muttered as soon as they stepped outside.

"When you said you were gonna get hit on purpose, I didn't think you could do it," Ensho said, grabbing Kiyotaka's shoulder and grinning. "But your black-heartedness comes in handy sometimes, eh?"

"I hope you'll be able to transcend your terrible personality too," replied Kiyotaka.

"What did you say?"

"Now, now," said Komatsu, interrupting the two glaring men. "You did a good job making him snap."

“Yes, those glasses of his were fake, weren’t they?”

“Were they? But why does it matter?”

“His fake glasses and the design of them, his suit and shoes, and the way he talked and behaved made it clear that he wanted to be seen as a smart person. So I thought I could make him lose his temper if I insulted him by implying the opposite. That said, it honestly doesn’t feel good to attack someone’s weakness, even if they’re a bad person.” Kiyotaka sighed as if he was ashamed of himself.

Ensho said nothing, while Komatsu looked at Kiyotaka’s reddened cheek, feeling uneasy.

“So, uh, is your face all right?” Komatsu asked. “It looked like he hit you pretty hard.”

“It’s fine. I turned my face in the direction of the punch, so the impact was less than it seemed. My skin might be a bit red, though,” Kiyotaka replied, placing a hand on his cheek.

“Oh!” Ensho’s eyes widened. “So that’s why it didn’t seem to do much that time.”

“What exactly are you talking about?”

“The time I snuck into Kura!”

“Ah, yes, the time you decided to play cat burglar.”

“Cat burglar?” Komatsu’s eyes widened.

“It really pisses me off,” Ensho grumbled. “It’s like I’m the only one who got hurt.”

“I’m surprised you have the nerve to say that.”

“*Anyway*,” Komatsu said in a cheerful tone, trying to change the subject before they started fighting again, “I’m just glad no one scary came out from the back. You know, like that cliché where you argue with the staff at a rip-off joint and the bouncers come out.”

Kiyotaka and Ensho stopped in their tracks and turned around.

“No...it looks like they did come out,” said Kiyotaka.

“Yeah,” confirmed Ensho.

The three of them were standing a little ways into a narrow alley.

“Huh?” Komatsu turned around and saw four men in suits with short wooden swords. They had crooked grins on their faces, but they looked more like hosts than bouncers.

“Four of them, is it?” remarked Kiyotaka.

“They’re only armed with wooden swords and they’re skinny as heck. This’ll be a walk in the park,” said Ensho.

“Normally you shouldn’t judge people by their appearances, but this time, I agree with you. We need to make sure not to strike before they do, though.”

“Gotta call it self-defense, yeah?”

“Correct. Komatsu, go to the Gion Peace Society’s meeting place and tell them that a couple of weak young men are being attacked.”

The Gion Peace Society, a volunteer group that protected the peace in Gion, met on Fridays and weekends. The meetings essentially only consisted of the regular members getting together for drinks, though.

“You guys? Weak young men?” Komatsu scoffed. “But are you gonna be all right? They’ve got four people on their side.” He looked around with unease.

“You’ll be a burden if you stick around, old man,” Ensho said nonchalantly, cracking his neck.

“Huh?” Komatsu’s eyes widened.

Kiyotaka gave a strained smile. “Well, it’s true.”

“This works for me,” said Ensho. “I’ve got some pent-up stress to let out.”

“Please go easy on them.”

As they talked, the men with the wooden swords rushed at them.

“Wait here, guys! I’ll call for help!” Komatsu shouted, turning his back on them and running away.

“Sorry, but by the time you get back, these little punks’ll be beaten to a pulp!”
The men laughed.

Komatsu panicked. Sure, Kiyotaka and Ensho were strong, but they were up against four people with weapons. He prayed for their safety as he barged into the Gion Peace Society’s meeting place, which was located among a row of townhouses.

“E-Excuse me! Please help! Two weak young men are being attacked by thugs! They’re going to get beaten up!” he shouted anxiously, repeating the words Kiyotaka had told him.

The men who had been drinking in the hall stopped and immediately switched gears. “What did you say?” they asked, standing up.

“Th-This way!”

However, after rushing to the scene, neither the thugs, Kiyotaka, nor Ensho were anywhere to be found.

Komatsu froze. “Huh? Where did they go?”

“Where are they, Komatsu?” the men asked, looking at him.

“They were right here...” *Did they get taken somewhere?*

Fortunately, Komatsu didn’t have to panic for long before Kiyotaka and Ensho appeared at the end of the road. Both of them had baffled looks on their faces.

“Great, you’re both safe,” said Komatsu. “Where are the thugs?”

“They ran away once they realized we had the upper hand,” replied Kiyotaka.

“We gave chase, but we lost sight of ’em.”

“It’s unbelievable how quickly they disappeared.”

“All they’re good for is running away, eh?”

The two apprentices gave exasperated shrugs.

“Look, I’m just glad you’re all right.” Komatsu placed a hand on his chest in relief.

The three of them thanked the Gion Peace Society members and decided to call it a night.

3

The next day, Sakichi Sumikawa came to the office and Komatsu gave him their report.

The client gave a disappointed sigh. "So Hiroki really was running a clip joint..."

Several pieces of evidence were laid out on the table: the large bill, a photo of the fake Romanée-Conti bottle, and the voice recordings.

"Yes." Komatsu nodded and glanced at Kiyotaka and Ensho. "They really raked him over the coals, so he might be more well-behaved from now on, but I can't say for sure."

"Thanks," Sakichi said weakly. He looked wistfully at the pictures of his cousin punching Kiyotaka and swinging a chair at him.

"Excuse me, Sakichi..." Kiyotaka said hesitantly.

"What is it?" The client looked up.

"You said you thought of Hiroki as a younger brother, but the reverse didn't seem to be true. Is there some sort of discord between you two?"

Sakichi scratched his head. "Well, I don't need to hide this because everyone in Gion knows. Hiroki and I aren't normal cousins. His grandmother was my grandfather's mistress."

Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho gulped.

"Not just that, but there was some drama between our mothers, who were half-sisters. I never thought it had anything to do with us. But after I took over the family restaurant, we grew apart. Hiroki originally opened a restaurant in Gion too, but then he turned it into a bar, and now it's what you saw yesterday. I think, at first, he was determined to do better than our restaurant."

"I see," Kiyotaka whispered.

“I hope this brings him to his senses,” Sakichi said to himself with a deep sigh.

So basically, Sakichi Sumikawa and Hiroki Tadokoro are cousins, but Sakichi is the grandson of the lawful wife and Hiroki is the grandson of the mistress. I always thought Kyoto was a small world, but who would’ve thought two cousins with such a complicated relationship would be doing business in the same small neighborhood of Gion? Fate works in weird ways, huh? Komatsu thought bitterly as he sipped his coffee.

*

Was this fate too?

Not long after, there was a new request for the Komatsu Detective Agency.

“My wife has been acting suspiciously lately. I think she might be cheating on me.”

In other words, it was an infidelity investigation. The client had come to the office before Kiyotaka and Ensho’s arrival, put in the request, and left. It was a very typical request for a detective agency. Komatsu had no complaints whatsoever. However...

“Tailing someone for an infidelity investigation? Leave it to me,” Kiyotaka said with a smile.

Komatsu stared at him in silence. He was grateful that Kiyotaka was proactive about working, but he didn’t think the young man was suited to this kind of job. With his model-like looks, he would stand out too much if he tried to tail someone. Ensho seemed like the better choice. He was certainly good-looking, but not in the gorgeous way that Kiyotaka was.

Komatsu looked at Ensho, who had plunked himself down onto the sofa with an art textbook. The man made no attempt to look his way. *It’s hard to ask him...*

Kiyotaka tilted his head. “Is something the matter, Komatsu?”

“Oh, no. I can handle this one by myself, so don’t worry about it.” Komatsu pulled Kiyotaka closer by the arm and whispered, “More importantly, don’t

forget to teach Ensho about antiques. You're his teacher, aren't you?"

Ensho had seemed very happy during the lecture about the wine bottle. Komatsu appreciated that Kiyotaka was putting so much effort into the detective work, but he didn't think he should neglect his work as Ensho's teacher either.

Kiyotaka gave Komatsu an apologetic look. "Thank you for your concern."

Well, it's not so much concern as it is wanting to maintain a positive atmosphere here. I don't want Ensho putting me on edge again.

"By the way, what exactly is the infidelity investigation about?" Kiyotaka asked.

Komatsu checked his phone. "First off, the target's the wife, who's in her late forties. Here's a picture of her."

He showed Kiyotaka the screen. Ensho took a peek too. The picture showed an elegant woman in a kimono.

"The client is a tax accountant who works from home, and he's pretty rich. His wife is a housewife. They originally lived in Tokyo, but they moved here last year when their daughter was accepted to a university in Kyoto. Right now, they live in a luxury apartment in a prime location. The wife recently started taking flower arranging lessons in Gion."

Kiyotaka looked at the photo and returned the phone to Komatsu.

"The place is called Hana-tsumugi," Komatsu continued. The name meant "flower weaving." "They teach a pretty major school of ikebana. She goes there every Wednesday at 2 p.m. for about three hours. According to the husband, 'She's been acting strangely lately. Sometimes she smells like alcohol when she comes back from her classes. My senses are telling me it's a man. She might be pretending to go to lessons and meeting up with him instead or meeting him on her way back. Honestly, I doubt she's even going to flower arranging classes in the first place.'"

Kiyotaka hummed. "Did the husband check with the school?"

"I asked him that too, but he said he couldn't do something that uncool."

"I see." Kiyotaka smiled.

"The fee for the lessons really is being paid from their bank account, but that would happen automatically once you sign up."

"Indeed. Has the wife's spending become more rampant, by the way?"

"Doesn't seem like it. Well, apparently it was already rampant to begin with. She's into jewelry."

Ensho, who had been listening from off to the side, made a disgusted frown. He seemed to be repulsed by a certain type of woman.

"Anyway, today's Wednesday, so she has class," Komatsu continued. "I'm gonna stake out the school. The wife mentioned going there today, so if she doesn't show up, we'll know there's something shady going on."

"Right." Kiyotaka folded his arms. "We'll head out too, then."

"Huh?" Komatsu blinked. "No, I'll be fine on my own. We don't need a whole team for this."

"No, I'm referring to what you said earlier. There's a museum on Sanneizaka that I was thinking of going to."

"Oh, all right." Komatsu nodded.

Ensho looked annoyed, but even Komatsu could tell that the reluctant apprentice was actually full of excitement. He held a hand over his mouth to hide his creeping smile.

*

And so, the three left the office an hour before the flower arranging class was to begin. There was a pleasant breeze outside.

Good weather for a stakeout, Komatsu thought as he stretched. It was a weekday, summer break was over, and the fall foliage season hadn't begun yet, so he didn't have to worry about frustrating crowds. It wasn't that hot anymore either.

After a few minutes of walking, the flower arranging school came into view.

"Oh? Komatsu, look," Kiyotaka whispered, placing a hand on the detective's

shoulder. “Isn’t that your client’s wife over there?”

“Huh?”

A woman in a kimono was standing in front of the wooden townhouse, folding her parasol.

Komatsu’s eyes widened as he hurriedly took out his digital camera. “Whoa, you’re right. That’s her. She came pretty early, huh?” He pretended to take a photo of the townscape, making sure to include the target in the shot. After checking that the photo had been taken, he placed a hand on his chest in relief. “Well then, I’m gonna camp here until she comes out.” He quickly went to a location where he could monitor the entrance.

“Komatsu, make sure to keep track of the people coming in and out as well,” Kiyotaka called out.

“I-I know,” said the detective, his face twitching.

“Seems to me that he *didn’t* know,” muttered Ensho.

“Perhaps.” Kiyotaka chuckled.

*

Kiyotaka and Ensho left Komatsu and continued down the street, past East Oji Street and up the slope, looking up at Yasaka Tower.

“Hey, the point of your training is to broaden your views, ain’t it?” Ensho mumbled as they walked.

“Yes, that’s right,” Kiyotaka replied.

“Why’re you working for that dimwitted detective? Because it’s close to Kura and you get a lot of free time?”

“Dimwitted?” Kiyotaka chuckled. “I owe Komatsu quite a bit, and I do want to make him owe me a favor too.”

“Why would you want that?” Ensho frowned, baffled.

“Perhaps you’ll find out during this training term.” Kiyotaka smiled.

They stopped in front of a sign that said “Kiyomizu Sannenzaka Museum.” It was a small Japanese-style building with a tiled roof and glass-paned sliding

doors.

“There’s a museum tucked in here, eh?”

“It’s a private museum that opened in 2000. The director is Masayuki Murata, whose father was the founder of Murata Manufacturing.”

“So it’s a new place.”

“Yes, but it’s the first museum in Japan to have metalwork, lacquerware, Satsuma ware, and cloisonné ware from the Bakumatsu and Meiji periods permanently on display. The other day, Aoi—” Kiyotaka stopped as though he’d made a slip of the tongue.

Ensho gave an exasperated sigh. “You try not to talk about Aoi in front of me, don’t you?”

“Well...yes. I thought you might not want to hear me talk about her,” Kiyotaka said hesitantly.

Ensho shrugged in annoyance. “Why would it matter at this point? It feels worse having you be considerate of me.”

“I suppose so. I just thought that if I were in your shoes, I wouldn’t want to hear it.”

“I ain’t the same as you. You and Aoi were already a pair when I first met you, and before I knew it, you were already obsessed with her. If you completely stop talking about her now, it’ll just feel unnatural and gross, so keep being your usual obsessed self,” Ensho said flatly, looking Kiyotaka firmly in the eyes.

Kiyotaka hummed and nodded with a strained smile.

“Did I say something funny?”

“No, it’s just...” *If I were in his place, I definitely would’ve said the same thing. Even though we’re completely different on the outside, we really are similar in nature. I’m the same as this vulgar brute of a man.* “Part of me still refuses to admit it.”

“Uh, what?”

“It’s nothing. Back to what I was saying, the other day, Aoi put a piece by

Yasuyuki Namikawa in the display window at Kura.”

“Oh, and that made you think of this place.” Ensho nodded in understanding.

“Yes, it gave me a hint.” Kiyotaka stopped there. He wondered for a second if he should tell Ensho that it was Aoi’s idea to show him the “two Namikawas,” but he decided against it. Kiyotaka knew he was being jealous, but even if that weren’t the case, he felt that stirring up Ensho’s emotional state would hinder his learning. “This museum has a good collection of the two Namikawas’ works right now,” he said instead, opening the sliding door and going inside.

Ensho tilted his head as he watched Kiyotaka pay the entrance fee. “The two Namikawas?”

“They’re world-renowned cloisonné artists. Let’s look at their work first.”

Kiyotaka explained cloisonné ware to Ensho as they looked at the exhibits. Cloisonné ware is created by baking colors into a metal base. In Japanese, it is called “shippo,” meaning “seven treasures.” There are various theories as to where the name came from. One theory says it is because of the gemstones used as materials, while another says it is an allusion to the beauty of the seven treasures in the Lotus Sutra: gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, seashell, agate, and coral.

“The cloisonné technique is also used in jewelry, medals, and car emblems, so many people have seen it without knowing,” he continued as they went to the special exhibit area on the second floor.

Ensho stopped in front of Yasuyuki Namikawa’s work and stared fixedly at it. The piece he was looking at was called “Gourd-shaped vase with butterflies.” It was less than twenty centimeters tall. It depicted flowers and butterflies, and the butterflies in particular were extremely detailed, down to the veins on their wings. The craftsmanship was truly extraordinary.

“Incredible,” he murmured, gulping.

“Indeed.”

“A long time ago, I was impressed by an old man who painted on rice grains, but this is on a whole other level.”

“Yes, there’s more than just technique here. You can also feel the artist’s character and pride. It almost makes me forget to breathe.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Ensho nodded firmly, then suddenly realized how enthusiastic he sounded and pretended to act uninterested again.

“Yasuyuki Namikawa was born in Kyoto in the Bakumatsu period. He was active in the Meiji period and highly recognized for his wired cloisonné ware.”

“Is ‘wired’ what you call this technique that uses dividing lines?”

“Yes. The design is laid out with thin metal lines, allowing for very detailed patterns. However, the level of detail means that it’s time-consuming and requires even more technical finesse.”

“Makes sense,” murmured Ensho.

“Now, let me show you the other Namikawa.”

Kiyotaka continued walking and stopped in front of another piece of cloisonné ware. This one was a tray rather than a vase. It was called “Tray with two doves,” and true to its name, it depicted two doves nestled together, one white and one dark. Unlike Yasuyuki Namikawa’s work, which was drawn sharply and crisply, this one was soft and gentle, yet realistic. You could almost feel the birds’ warmth.

“This one is good too,” remarked Ensho.

“It’s by Sosuke Namikawa.”

“Hence ‘the two Namikawas,’ eh?” Ensho smirked.

“Sosuke Namikawa was from a farming family in Chiba and worked as a trader. He fell in love with cloisonné ware at an industrial expo and made an extreme career change, becoming a cloisonné artist and reforming the existing conventions by inventing a wireless technique. It was very well received.”

“So this one’s wireless cloisonné, then?” Ensho asked, looking down at the doves on the tray.

“Yes. The technique involves removing the silver wires before firing the piece. It’s said that adjusting the liquidity of the enamel is extremely difficult.”

“Wireless” didn’t mean that the finished piece didn’t have any lines. But compared to Yasuyuki Namikawa’s wired cloisonné ware, the lines were less emphasized, giving the piece a very soft impression.

“Yasuyuki Namikawa’s works were displayed at the expo where Sosuke Namikawa first encountered cloisonné ware,” Kiyotaka continued. “They were very popular there. My guess is that Sosuke Namikawa was astonished by them and had a burst of inspiration.”

“Yeah...” Ensho fell silent and slowly compared the two Namikawas’ works. They were both so brilliant that it was hard to tell which was superior. It was basically a matter of personal taste at this point. “He didn’t wanna go down the same road, so he came up with wireless cloisonné,” he murmured to himself as he stared at the tray.

Sosuke Namikawa had seen Yasuyuki Namikawa’s art and decided to take up the art of cloisonné. At first, he was probably strongly motivated by respect and aspiration. But once he went down that path, he would inevitably find himself wanting to catch up. From there, it wouldn’t have been unusual for envy to make its way into his heart and for his goal to change into surpassing his role model. And that desire had given birth to this wonderful technique and beautiful works of art.

“Yes, I think so too,” replied Kiyotaka. “As a result, Sosuke Namikawa won at the state guest house—well, no, it wasn’t a matter of winning or losing.” He closed his mouth.

“Eh?”

“It’s nothing. There are profound stories behind wonderful works of art like this. That’s part of what makes art so amazing,” Kiyotaka said lovingly as he looked at the displays.

Ensho chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking that your way of teaching ain’t fair.”

“It isn’t fair?” Kiyotaka blinked.

“For you, this kinda thing is the same as raving about something you really find delicious or interesting. Like when a ramen lover says, ‘That place’s ramen is really good’ even though they ain’t trying to recommend it.”

“Yes, that’s true, but...” Kiyotaka gave Ensho a confused look as if to ask, “What’s your point?”

“Up ’til now, I thought you were teaching Aoi all those details while showing off your knowledge, but you’re just like a ramen lover talking about ramen. No wonder she got hooked on art too.” Ensho put a hand on his mouth and snickered.

Kiyotaka thought he had understood Ensho’s mindset perfectly thus far, but this time, he couldn’t tell what he was trying to say. All he could respond with was a puzzled, “Huh?”

After that, Ensho continued to look enthusiastically at the art on display. In contrast, the other visitors stopping by the museum on a whim only took a quick look before leaving. Only a few of them took the time to look closely at the exhibits. Kiyotaka silently observed the museum’s interior decor and the visitors’ actions.

“What’re you doing?” asked Ensho.

“I’m observing, or rather, analyzing.”

“Analyzing?”

“I’m thinking of turning the Yagashira residence near the Philosopher’s Walk into a private museum one day. It would probably be around the same size as this one.”

“No way that’d work,” Ensho scoffed, facepalming.

“Why not?” Kiyotaka tilted his head.

“You really are a naive rich kid to the core. It takes a lot of money to run a private museum. You guys might be rich now, but you’ll burn through your savings real fast if you try to do something like that.”

“I know.” Kiyotaka nodded.

“Do you really?”

“That’s why I was thinking of combining it with a cafe. We’ll display art in the main hall and have a cafe area next to it.”

“Well, it *would* be a good location for a cafe, I guess.”

“Yes, but lately, I’ve been having my doubts about that too.”

“How come?”

“Most people in this world don’t savor art the way we do, do they?”

“Well, yeah.” Ensho nodded. “Normally they just walk around once and leave.”

“Right. If I were to open an art museum with a cafe at the Yagashira residence, I feel like the cafe would end up becoming the main attraction. If the art section required an entrance fee, most people probably wouldn’t go there.”

“Yeah.” Ensho crossed his arms.

“The reason I serve coffee at Kura is because I want people to relax and stay for a while as they look at the antiques. If I try to reproduce that at the Yagashira residence, I feel like it’ll turn into something else.”

“Just turn Kura into an antique cafe, then.”

“I considered that too, but if I were to start a real cafe there, it would be different from serving coffee every now and then when our regular customers come in. It would be difficult to have that coexist with the antiques, if that makes sense.”

“Well, there’s also the issue of humidity and stuff.”

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “So I haven’t been able to green-light any of my ideas yet. That said, I don’t want to force myself to settle on a decision anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Forced decisions don’t yield good results. My method is to see, hear, and learn about various things, ruminate on them over and over, and when I find an answer that speaks to me, only then do I take action. I consider right now to be a learning period for that purpose.”

Ensho looked at the younger apprentice in silence. Kiyotaka, noticing his gaze, looked him in the eye and changed the subject.

“Setting that aside, what did you think of the cloisonné ware?”

“I’m glad I came here, yeah,” Ensho murmured.

“That’s good.” Kiyotaka smiled. “Shall we return to the office, then?”

“Yeah.”

The two men left the museum.

Ensho looked at Kiyotaka, who was walking ahead of him, and said, “Hey, about those pictures you brought before...I changed my mind. Can I see them?”

“Sure,” Kiyotaka said without turning around. There was a slight smile on his face.

*

Meanwhile, Komatsu watched his target leave the flower arranging school after her lesson and get into a taxi on Shijo Street. It was all caught on camera too. He sent the client a message and a photo.

“She just got in a taxi.”

The reply came immediately.

“Thank you. That’s a relief.”

Komatsu let out a breath and stretched. The client’s wife hadn’t left the building midway through the class. It seemed that the husband had been worrying over nothing.

“Komatsu,” came a voice from behind him.

He turned around and saw Kiyotaka and Ensho there. “Oh, hey. You’re back already?”

“Yes,” replied Kiyotaka. “The client’s wife went home in a taxi, I see.”

“Yeah. Apparently, she always takes a taxi back at 5:30 p.m.” Because of that, the client had said there was no need to follow the taxi. “Nothing seemed suspicious. The husband was just paranoid.” Komatsu laughed.

Kiyotaka and Ensho exchanged looks.

“Huh? Why do you guys look like you have something to say?”

“Well, it looked like the wife was re-wearing that kimono,” Kiyotaka replied nonchalantly.

“Yeah, it was taken off and put back on,” Ensho agreed.

“Huh? Does that mean she was naked?” Komatsu’s face went pale.

“Shh,” Kiyotaka shushed him, holding his index finger in front of his mouth. “Let’s go back to the office for now.”

“O-Okay.” Komatsu nodded.

The three of them returned to the office.

4

“Is it true that she might’ve gone naked?” Komatsu asked impatiently the moment they entered the office.

“All we said was that it looked like she had taken off her kimono,” Kiyotaka said, exasperated. “We didn’t say she went naked.” He checked the photos Komatsu had taken and nodded. “Yes, she did take it off at some point and put it back on.”

“Yeah, her sash was in a slightly different position,” Ensho added.

Komatsu looked at the pictures too and tilted his head in confusion. “Really? I can’t tell what’s different at all.”

“You’re so oblivious. I bet you wouldn’t notice if your own wife was cheating on you.”

“H-Hey, that’s not very nice!”

“He might be happier that way,” said Kiyotaka, placing a hand on Komatsu’s shoulder.

“That’s even worse!” the detective exclaimed.

“Komatsu, can you show me the pictures of the people who went in and out

of the school today?” asked Kiyotaka.

“Yeah.”

Komatsu went to his desk, connected his digital camera to his computer, and displayed the photos on a large monitor. Most of them were of students going to the flower arranging class—there were no men, only middle-aged women wearing kimono.

Kiyotaka checked the pictures one by one. “Hm?” He frowned. “There’s one person in a suit. Can you zoom in on this one?”

It was a woman wearing a black suit and holding a large black bag. Komatsu nodded and enlarged the photo.

“I knew it,” Kiyotaka murmured.

“Do you know her?” asked Ensho.

“Yes, she’s a jewelry seller. I’ve met her before.”

“A jewelry seller...”

Next were the photos of the students leaving the school after class was over. Kiyotaka and Ensho scrutinized them carefully.

“Her, her, and her,” said Ensho. “These three changed back into their kimono.”

“But the others don’t seem to have taken theirs off,” added Kiyotaka.

“How can you tell?” Komatsu gaped.

“We saw the pictures of them when they entered the building,” Kiyotaka replied matter-of-factly.

“Yeah. You saw ’em too, didn’t you?”

“Sorry for not being able to tell,” Komatsu grumbled, pouting.

“Anyway, it’s strange,” Kiyotaka murmured as he looked at the students.

“What about it?” asked Komatsu.

“Well, think about it,” replied Ensho. “Why would you take off your kimono at a flower arranging class?”

“I wouldn’t necessarily consider that strange,” said Kiyotaka. “There could be students learning the proper way to put on kimono.”

“Oh, yeah.” Komatsu nodded.

“What concerns me is that, for a class held in such a small townhouse, there seem to be too many students entering and leaving.”

“You’re right.” Ensho crossed his arms.

“That’s a good point,” Komatsu murmured, looking at the photos. Now that Kiyotaka mentioned it, there *were* quite a lot of people. He didn’t know how much space was given to each person, but with this many, it’d have to be cramped in there.

As they were pondering, they heard the front door slide open. It was Kazuyo.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said. “I brought snacks. They’re homemade ohagi.” Ohagi was a traditional confection made with glutinous rice and sweet red bean paste.

“Perfect timing,” Kiyotaka said with a happy smile.

“How so?” Kazuyo asked.

“Thank you for the snacks, Kazuyo. I love ohagi.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Also, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“Huh?” Kazuyo blinked.

“Could you tell us what you know about a flower arranging school called Hana-tsumugi?”

“I suppose...?”

*

After the table was set with tea and the ohagi, Kazuyo began her explanation. “The teacher there is named Atsuko. She should be over fifty by now. She had a hard life and hated Gion. When she was still young, she married a rich man in Kobe who was much older than her.”

“Why did she hate Gion?” asked Kiyotaka.

“She felt inferior. Her mother taught flower arranging too, and she fell in love with one of her students, who was very rich even by Gion’s standards. But the man had a family already. In other words, she was his mistress. Since Atsuko was born as a mistress’s child, she was bullied by the real wife’s child.”

Kazuyo placed a hand on her cheek and sighed.

“Even after getting married and moving to Kobe, Atsuko failed to have children for a while, and her mother-in-law was very harsh with her. She finally managed to give birth to a boy, but her husband passed away soon after, so she had to come back to Gion with her son. She followed in her mother’s footsteps and opened a flower arranging school, but she only accepted female students. She must have not wanted to be gossiped about because of her mother’s past. Her school built up quite a good reputation, but then her mother passed away due to illness...”

Kazuyo took a sip of her tea and sighed again.

“I think it would’ve been around the time when you were born, Kiyotaka. Atsuko’s house caught on fire...and it was arson.”

“Arson?” The other three exchanged looks.

“Yes...Atsuko cried and cried because she’d lost everything important to her. But after that, she recovered from her grief and reopened her flower arranging school in the same place.”

“Did she remarry?” asked Kiyotaka.

Kazuyo gently shook her head. “No, she did not.”

“Where is her son now?”

“He’s here in Gion. He went to Tokyo for a while, but he came back. Hiroki’s just like his mother. He said he hated Gion and left, but he came back.”

The three men looked at each other upon hearing the name “Hiroki.”

“Is Atsuko’s surname Tadokoro by any chance?” asked Kiyotaka.

“Yes. Her full name is Atsuko Tadokoro.”

“I see...” Kiyotaka muttered. “So what is her son—Hiroki Tadokoro—doing now?”

“After coming back to Gion, he opened a French restaurant, but it didn’t go well. From there, he tried a few other things, and now, he’s started a greedy business that’s been getting bad reviews. It seems like he’s determined not to lose to Sakichi, who’s from the legitimate side of the family.”

In other words, Hiroki Tadokoro, the owner of that scam club, was the son of Atsuko, the flower arranging teacher.

“This is fishy as hell,” murmured Ensho.

“Shhh,” Komatsu shushed him, holding up his index finger.

“Is Atsuko still on bad terms with her half-sister—her father’s legitimate daughter?” Kiyotaka asked without reservation. By Atsuko’s half-sister, he meant Sakichi Sumikawa’s mother.

Kazuyo weakly placed a hand on her forehead and said, “Yes. Her name is Kayoko, and she’s one year older than Atsuko. Kayoko wasn’t particularly attractive, while Atsuko was a real head-turner. I think Kayoko was jealous because of that. She loved to say, ‘A mistress’s child can’t get married.’ When Atsuko got married ahead of Kayoko—and to a wealthy man, no less—Kayoko seemed truly frustrated.”

“Blegh,” said Ensho, slumping his shoulders in disgust.

“But the main issue that soured their relationship was the presence of another girl named Taeko,” Kazuyo added.

“Taeko?” Kiyotaka tilted his head.

“Taeko is...the daughter of Atsuko and Kayoko’s father’s close friend. She and Atsuko were best friends all the way from childhood to adulthood, but something must’ve happened after Taeko’s father passed away. For some reason, Taeko left Atsuko and became close with Kayoko instead. After that was the fire at Atsuko’s house, so Atsuko really did lose everything.”

There probably wasn’t anyone who liked to hear about such messy relationships between women, but Ensho’s displeasure was written all over his

face. He looked genuinely annoyed. “Jealous women are so disgusting,” he said. “They make the most ridiculous claims.”

“Yes...”

Komatsu couldn’t help but ask, “So was the fire at Atsuko’s house because of that kind of jealousy?”

“No, of course not.” Kazuyo laughed. “No one would commit arson because of that. Atsuko seemed very wealthy despite not receiving much of an inheritance from her late father or husband, so there were rumors that she’d actually received a large amount in secret. I heard the arson was the work of burglars who were after her fortune. How awful.” She smiled weakly.

*

After Kazuyo left, Komatsu, Kiyotaka, and Ensho individually mulled over what they had just learned. Kiyotaka sat in a chair, his arms and legs crossed, making no attempt to move. Ensho was leaning back on the sofa, looking up at the ceiling, and Komatsu was sitting at his desk, resting his chin on his hand.

“That story was pretty deep, huh?” said Komatsu, unable to bear the silence anymore.

Ensho said nothing.

Kiyotaka gave a strained smile and said, “Indeed.” He stroked his chin in thought for a while before nodding and looking up. “Komatsu, could I get you to investigate Atsuko’s father, Kayoko, and Taeko? Also, please gather information on the arson at Atsuko’s house.”

“Uh, sure.” Komatsu nodded and turned to his computer.

“Email me your findings. Based on what they are, I might ask you to do something else.” Kiyotaka stood up and grabbed his jacket, which had been hung over the back of a chair.

“Where are you going?” asked Ensho.

“I’m thinking of paying Atsuko’s flower arranging school a visit.” Kiyotaka grinned and left the office.

“Oh my, so you’re the detective from the agency everyone’s been talking about. I heard the rumors, but you really are very young, hm?” remarked Atsuko.

Upon Kiyotaka’s visit to the flower arrangement school Hana-tsumugi, Atsuko had gladly welcomed him inside and provided tea. She was wearing a light green unlined kimono and had a soft, elegant smile. There was a youthfulness and charm to her that made it hard to believe she was supposedly over fifty. As Kazuyo had said, she was a beautiful woman.

Kiyotaka looked around the room as he drank his tea. Before entering, he had observed as much of the townhouse’s interior as he could, but he still didn’t think it was large enough to hold a class with so many people. It wouldn’t be *impossible*, but...

“So, Kiyotaka, I hear you’re the grandson of Yagashira, the famous appraiser?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “I’ve been doing various jobs to broaden my views.”

“Oh, how nice.”

“My grandfather is very strict. He won’t let me come home until I’m done with my training.”

“That does sound like Seiji.”

“I do sneak into the house, though.”

Atsuko covered her mouth and giggled.

Kiyotaka looked out the window and noticed a cherry blossom tree in the small garden. The flowers were in bloom. “Cherry blossoms in autumn? Is this an out-of-season blooming?” he asked quietly.

In summer, cherry blossom trees produced flower buds that would remain dormant until the following spring. However, there were times when temperature fluctuations in autumn caused trees to bloom, mistakenly thinking that spring had come. This phenomenon was called out-of-season blooming.

“You’re very knowledgeable. This tree has been here since I was a child. One

year, it bloomed out of season, and it's been blooming in autumn ever since."

"How fascinating." Kiyotaka chuckled. "I heard from my grandfather that this house caught on fire once. Was the cherry tree all right?"

"The fire was confined to the inside of the house, so the garden was fine, and the neighboring houses were also untouched. That was the one silver lining," Atsuko replied with a weak laugh.

After chatting for a little while, Kiyotaka put down his teacup and said, "By the way, I came today to make a request of you."

"A request?"

"I happened to hear a little secret about this school," Kiyotaka said, lowering his voice.

Atsuko flinched and looked straight at him. Her lips were curved in a smile, but her eyes were serious. She was on guard, although not blatantly so.

"Wait," Kiyotaka continued, purposely waving his hands to seem flustered. "Please don't get the wrong idea. I'm not going to expose this place."

"Expose? Secret? What are you talking about?" Atsuko slightly tilted her head.

"I heard about this place from Hiroki. I was hoping you would enlist me as well, assuming I meet your standards." Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and smiled.

Atsuko fell silent. After a while, she looked at him dubiously and said, "You?"

"Yes. I can't say this loudly, but I could use a little more spending money, you see. Do you think you could make use of me?" Kiyotaka asked with a pleading look in his eyes.

Atsuko eyed him from top to bottom and chuckled. "Yes, this is good. I'd be happy to have a beautiful man like you join."

"Thank you. I'm glad."

"Our hours of operation are on weekdays during the day, though. Is that all right?"

"Yes, although I can't come every day."

“That’s fine.”

“So, could you show me around?” Kiyotaka asked softly.

Atsuko quietly stood up and removed the hanging scroll from the alcove. Behind it was a sliding door that opened to a staircase leading to the basement.

“Oh, so you go through here...” Kiyotaka was impressed.

*

“I wonder what he’s trying to accomplish by barging into that flower arranging school,” Komatsu murmured as he tapped away on his keyboard.

“Ain’t it just recon? He’s gonna see what it’s like inside,” Ensho replied in a bored tone. He was on the sofa, reading about cloisonné ware.

“But even if the house is small and there are clearly too many students, it’s not like he can do anything with just that information, right?” Komatsu tilted his head.

Ensho squinted at him in exasperation.

“What’s with that look?”

“You really are a dimwit, eh?”

“A dimwit?!”

“There’s probably something going on in that house’s basement.”

“Huh?” Komatsu blinked.

“The other day, when we left that rip-off joint, the thugs that chased us looked like hosts, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, and they ended up getting away.”

“They literally vanished into thin air. Thinking about it now, it was towards that flower arrangement school.”

“Oh, so they ran in there?”

“Yeah.” Ensho nodded. “Hiroki Tadokoro’s rip-off joint and Atsuko Tadokoro’s flower arranging school ain’t on the same street, but they’re really close. There’s basically just one house between them. My guess is that there’s

something in that basement.”

“What do you think it is?” Komatsu gulped.

“Well, probably some kinda secret club.”

“Oh, so the kiddo went to see if that was true.” Komatsu placed a hand over his mouth in surprise, as if he finally understood. Then he looked up, realizing something. “But if he goes there and interrogates them about the secret underground club, it’s not like they’ll tell him the truth, right?”

Ensho shrugged. “You don’t know that guy at all, do you?”

“What?!”

“He’ll definitely trick them into letting him in.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. Ha ha,” Komatsu gave a hollow laugh as he continued to type.

Ensho glanced at the detective and muttered, “Seriously, why is he working for this guy?” before looking back down at his study materials.

After a while, Komatsu looked up and said, “All right, I’ve got it.”

“Got what?”

“The fire at Atsuko Tadokoro’s house was twenty-five years ago in October. The culprit still hasn’t been caught, and the fire was restricted to the inside of the house. Since there was evidence of the house being ransacked, the police thought it was the work of thieves.”

“Twenty-five years ago...” Ensho frowned.

“Atsuko’s father died in the war, but like Kazuyo said, he was really rich. He liked precious gems and ran a jewelry store alongside his restaurant.”

“Oh?” Ensho’s eyes widened.

“When Atsuko was twenty, a rich man more than twice her age who ran a real estate agency in Kobe fell in love with her at first sight, and they got married. She gave birth to Hiroki at age twenty-seven, and she became a widow at age thirty. Her half-sister, Kayoko Sumikawa, got married at twenty-six to someone she was introduced to. Her husband married into the family and they had their

firstborn son, Sakichi, soon after.”

Komatsu took a breath before continuing.

“Their best friend’s full name was Taeko Toda. Her maiden name was Yasui. She got married at twenty-three and had a daughter two years later. Kazuyo said the change happened ‘after Taeko’s father passed away,’ so I looked that up. Her father died of a heart attack twenty-five years ago in March.”

Ensho gaped at the detective. “How were you able to find all that info?”

“Well, uh, I have my ways. Anyway, I gotta report this.” Komatsu hurriedly began typing his email to Kiyotaka.

*

As he descended the hidden staircase, Kiyotaka took a pair of black-rimmed glasses from his pocket and put them on. They were the special glasses he’d used during a previous infiltration—the ones equipped with a camera and other features.

“Oh, you look good in glasses too,” said Atsuko, sounding rather happy. She seemed to like men with glasses.

“Thank you.”

There was a large room at the bottom of the stairs, around seventy square meters in size. It had a low ceiling with a small chandelier. The floor was lined with caramel-colored leather sofas, mood lights, and decorative plants. There was a recessed area with a bar counter, behind which was a row of whisky and brandy bottles. In the far back, there was another set of stairs that probably led to Hiroki’s clip joint.

“I never would’ve imagined such a large underground space,” said Kiyotaka, genuinely impressed. He pretended to adjust his glasses as he activated the secret camera.

“Back in the Meiji period, this was the house of an important person’s mistress. The mistress owned the store, which is why it’s still here to this day.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka nodded. “High-ranking officials needed hiding places with escape routes since there could be people targeting their lives. It’s exciting

when you think about it that way.”

“Yes.” Atsuko smiled.

“Are you closed for business today?”

“We’re only open in the daytime unless it’s Friday.”

Kiyotaka nodded again. It had been Friday when the host-like thugs had attacked them. “This is a club for entertaining housewives and the like, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Do you sell *those* services too?” Kiyotaka asked with a bold, mischievous smile.

Atsuko giggled. “If I said yes, would you do it?”

“Hmm, I’m not confident I’d be able to satisfy such experienced women.”

“Oh, but your youth is all you need.” She giggled again and gave him a light tap on the chest. “I’m just kidding. I don’t know what Hiroki told you, but this is really just a normal club. Nothing untoward is happening here.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. It’s not publicly advertised with a sign, but it *is* registered correctly as a business. I believe that what goes around, comes around. So it’s a proper business; it’s just run discreetly. Rich housewives can’t go to clubs because they have to keep up appearances, so they come to this underground club under the guise of learning flower arranging. They take off their kimono, change into dresses, and dance.” Atsuko lifted the hem of her kimono and did a twirl.

“Ah...” *So that’s why they took off their kimono*, thought Kiyotaka. He was expecting it to be a place where rich wives bought services from young men, so this finding was rather anticlimactic.

“This is a place for missuses to play in secret and relieve stress. If I started selling such illegal services, the business wouldn’t last for long.”

Kiyotaka looked at the labels on the bottles at the bar counter. Many of them were expensive, but none of them seemed to be fake.

“Does that mean you’ve been running this club for quite a while now?” he

asked.

“Yes. It isn’t easy for a woman to survive on her own just by teaching flower arranging.”

“How long have you been doing this? Since before the fire?”

“Yes. Before the fire, after my mother passed away.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka nodded and gave Atsuko a sideways glance. “The wives who come here keep it a secret from their husbands, I assume?”

“Yes, of course. That’s how they can then go home and be good wives. The wives of wealthy men may seem dazzling—even enviable—on the outside, but in reality, they’re caged birds. Marrying an influential man is exciting at first, but the honeymoon period doesn’t last long. After that, you have to pay attention to your behavior at home and keep up appearances in front of others. It’s really suffocating.”

Atsuko’s words carried weight. She herself must have suffered after marrying into a rich family.

“Aren’t the prices here expensive, though? Won’t their husbands find out?”

“Well, I *am* doing business here, so it isn’t going to be cheap. These are normal market prices, though, and besides, I also accept jewelry as payment.”

“Jewelry?”

“Yes. Husbands are sensitive to cash flow, but they won’t notice jewelry at home disappearing. If the wives don’t have enough money to come here, they can ask their husbands to buy them jewelry instead.”

“I see. That’s clever.” Kiyotaka was genuinely impressed. “I actually happened to see a jewelry seller I know come out of here the other day. Was she buying jewelry from you?”

“Yes, but I also ask her to show me any rare jewelry she has in stock, since I like jewelry too. Oh, that goes for you too, Kiyotaka. If you have any rare jewelry, please show it to me.”

“We mainly deal in antiques, so we don’t get much jewelry.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. Anyway, when will you be able to start? Everyone will be happy to have someone like you here.”

“Let’s see...”

As they were talking, a loud voice came from the stairs in the back. “Mom, there’s something I want to ask you!” It was Hiroki Tadokoro.

Atsuko grimaced and turned around. “What is it? You tried to use my boys as bouncers the other day. I’m sick of your short-sighted ways.”

“Don’t say that...”

“Besides, I’m in the middle of teaching a new employee.” Atsuko turned to Kiyotaka.

Hiroki looked at the young man and his eyes widened. “M-Mom, this is the guy! The spy Sakichi sent to my place!”

“Huh?” Atsuko’s eyes widened as well. “Really?”

Kiyotaka gave an apologetic frown. “I’m sorry. I must apologize. I didn’t come here because I wanted to work. I’m investigating on behalf of the Komatsu Detective Agency.” He took off his glasses and tucked them into his chest pocket.

“You tricked me?” Atsuko glared sternly at him.

“Yes. However, I’m not here as Sakichi’s spy. The husband of one of your customers was suspicious of this place and put in a request with us. This is my job, so I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to report everything to our client.”

Atsuko trembled and said, “Do as you please.” She turned her back to him.

“I cannot accept the way Hiroki does business, though, and I hope he has a change of heart.”

Hiroki clicked his tongue. “I don’t want to hear that from Sakichi’s spy. He’s getting in my way again, isn’t he?”

“What do you mean by ‘again’?”

“Every time I open a new restaurant, he uses his friends to sabotage it. I ended up in debt because of that...so I don’t have any other choice now.”

“What? If you were in debt, you could have just told me,” said Atsuko, surprised.

Hiroki looked like he was about to cry. “You’ve suffered enough, mom. I didn’t want to make you worry. I wanted to get through it by myself.”

“You say that, but I’ve been worried for a long time now. I’ve heard the bad reviews, you know?” Atsuko sounded exasperated.

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka gave a strained smile. “If scamming others is the result of your valiant effort, I’d say you put the cart before the horse.”

Hiroki gulped.

“As for Atsuko’s secret club...to be honest, there are elements of it that I can’t sympathize with, but I can tell that you’re committed to this.”

Atsuko turned around and gave Kiyotaka a dubious look.

“In hopes that Hiroki will change his ways going forward, please allow me to pry into your affairs a little bit, Atsuko.”

“What?”

“Does this picture mean anything to you?” Kiyotaka took out his phone and showed Atsuko a picture.

The woman squinted at the screen. Suddenly, she screamed, “Ahhhhh!” and fell to her knees.

“What’s wrong, mom?!” Hiroki exclaimed, bewildered.

“Where did you see this?! Where is it right now?!” Atsuko asked desperately, clinging to Kiyotaka’s feet.

6

Several days later, after receiving word that the cipher had been solved, Sakichi Sumikawa visited the Komatsu Detective Agency again. He was clutching the cloth-wrapped safe to his chest, unable to hide his excitement.

Upon entering, he was greeted by the chief detective, Komatsu, and the two assistants, Kiyotaka and Ensho.

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Please have a seat.”

Sakichi sat down on a sofa in the reception area and looked at the privacy screen in a corner of the office. “Was that screen there before?” he murmured quietly, tilting his head.

Komatsu and his assistants didn’t seem to hear him. Kiyotaka was nonchalantly preparing coffee.

After getting the formal greetings out of the way and setting the refreshments on the table, Komatsu and Kiyotaka sat down, facing Sakichi. Ensho stood behind him, leaning against the wall.

“Did you really figure out the password?” Sakichi asked impatiently.

Kiyotaka smiled and nodded. “Yes. Could you show us the safe so that we can check?”

Sakichi nodded, unwrapped the safe, and put it on the table.

Kiyotaka put on his white gloves and gently lifted the safe onto his lap. Then he looked at the client’s face and grinned. “Before we begin, I’d like to ask you something, Sakichi. That letter was fake, wasn’t it?”

“Huh?” Sakichi gave the young man a clueless look.

“The letter you said was left to you by your grandfather,” said Kiyotaka, holding up a photocopy of the letter in question.

I am writing this letter before going to the battlefield. Since it is you, I can tell you that I believe World War II was a complete failure. I do not think I will be able to return safely. Thus, I have decided to leave you this letter.

Hidden deep underneath the living room is something I have left for you. I have enclosed a cipher with this letter. You should be able to solve it. Please make use of what is inside to support you for the rest of your life.

Note that the safe is custom-made by a craftsman. If you try to force it open or enter an incorrect password more than three times, the contents of the safe will be destroyed. I would rather make it worthless than give it to someone other than you.

I wish you happiness from the bottom of my heart.

“It was you who wrote this letter, not your grandfather, right?” asked Kiyotaka.

“What’s this all of a sudden?” Sakichi scowled.

“I believe it is a detective’s duty to carry out their client’s request with confidentiality. However, if it means being complicit in a crime, that’s a different story. This safe was stolen, wasn’t it?”

“Could you stop it with the baseless accusations? What proof do you have?” Sakichi glared at Kiyotaka.

“Proof, you say? When World War II was being fought, it was referred to in Japan as the ‘Pacific War’ or the ‘Greater East Asia War.’ It was not called ‘World War II’ until after it ended. Someone who had not yet gone to the battlefield would not have known that name. Therefore, it is clear that your grandfather did not write this letter.”

Sakichi gulped.

“I imagine you had a general idea of what the real letter said and wrote this based on it. That’s why you inadvertently used the term ‘World War II.’”

“Even so, that isn’t proof that I stole the safe. I’ll be taking my leave now.”

Sakichi stood up and tried to take the safe from Kiyotaka. However, Ensho grabbed him from behind and pinned his arms behind his back.

“You ain’t getting away.”

“Wh-What?”

Kiyotaka sighed as he watched Sakichi struggle. Then he said, “Atsuko, you can come out now.”

“Huh?” Sakichi froze.

Atsuko Tadokoro came out from behind the privacy screen. She was wearing a patterned kimono adorned with autumn leaves.

“Aunt Atsuko...” Sakichi grimaced in Ensho’s hold.

“Long time no see, Sakichi.” Atsuko’s mouth was smiling, but her eyes were

very much not. “You’ve been doing quite a lot for Hiroki, I hear. When he opened his French restaurant, you put bugs in the food, smashed the windows, wrote terrible reviews on the internet, and so on and so forth.” She giggled, her beautiful smile making her all the more imposing.

Sakichi’s face went pale. Komatsu trembled in fear too.

“Sakichi, Atsuko has the real letter your grandfather left behind,” said Kiyotaka.

Atsuko took the letter out of her sash and showed it to them.

Dear Moichi Yasui,

I am entrusting you with this letter before going to the battlefield. Since you are my closest friend, I will tell you that I believe this war was a complete failure. I do not think I will be able to return safely. Thus, I have decided to leave you this letter. If I do not return, please give it to Hisako and Atsuko.

Hisako, Atsuko, I want to sincerely apologize for the suffering I have caused you. When I die, I imagine you will receive little to nothing from my estate. So I left something for you buried deep underneath the basement room. I want you to at least have this. I have enclosed a cipher with this letter. Since Atsuko and I have dabbled in so many riddles together, she should be able to solve it. Please make use of what is inside to support you for the rest of your life.

Note that the safe is custom-made by a craftsman. If you try to force it open or enter an incorrect password more than three times, the contents of the safe will be destroyed. I would rather make it worthless than give it to someone other than you.

I sincerely wish you happiness from the bottom of my heart.

“This is the real letter,” Kiyotaka said, looking sharply at Sakichi.

Their client’s eyes widened.

“This safe indeed belonged to your grandfather. However, it does not belong to you. It was left to Atsuko and her mother. So why is it in your possession now?” Kiyotaka gave the safe to Komatsu and stood up. “After doing some research, one theory came to mind. It all started with the death of your

grandfather's best friend, Moichi Yasui. If I'm not mistaken, that was twenty-five years ago?"

Sakichi absentmindedly gave a slight nod.

"I imagine Taeko found this letter when she was organizing her deceased father's things. At the time, Taeko and Atsuko were best friends, so she would have delivered the letter to Atsuko immediately. Then, she would have seen not only the treasure, but the secret underground club as well, right?" Kiyotaka shot Atsuko a glance.

"Yes. I ended up showing Taeko the club. Once she found out, she lost trust in me. She looked at me as if I were something dirty. Nevertheless, we searched under the floor together, and we were both delighted when we found the safe." Atsuko gave a small sigh. "I figured out the code right away and opened it. I didn't tell Taeko the password. When I saw the treasure inside, I was truly astounded. Taeko was too. She was lost for words."

"After that, Taeko distanced herself from you, didn't she?"

"Yes." Atsuko had a sad look in her eyes.

"Her envy must've evolved into bitterness."

Taeko may have originally felt bad for her friend, Atsuko, who was exceptionally beautiful but had suffered a lot of hardship in life. But unbeknownst to her, Atsuko had secretly been operating a club and her wealthy father had left her an incredible treasure. Taeko must've grown so jealous that she couldn't keep being friends with her.

"Unable to control her emotions, she left Atsuko," Kiyotaka continued, "and told everything to Atsuko's half-sister, Kayoko—in other words, Sakichi's mother."

Sakichi stared at Kiyotaka in silence.

"A person being jealous on their own isn't too much of a threat, but when they meet someone who feels the same way, they can mistake themselves for being in the right. Kayoko would have been especially bitter because her own father had given a treasure to his mistress and her child. That's why Kayoko and Taeko stole the safe and set the house on fire to destroy the evidence."

Komatsu's face stiffened upon hearing how extreme their actions had been.

"Now, as for why you waited until now to get it unlocked..."

"The statute of limitations, right?" Ensho replied.

Sakichi whirled around to look at his captor.

"Seven years for theft, but twenty-five for arson," Ensho continued. "You were waiting for that, yeah?"

"I imagine so," replied Kiyotaka. "I don't know whether they were waiting eagerly or out of fear due to the weight of their crime, but at any rate, they would feel safer now that twenty-five years have passed."

Sakichi grinned, perhaps relieved by the reminder. "Y-Yeah, even if you're right, it's past the statute of limitations."

"Out of curiosity, why do you have the safe that was supposed to be in your mother's hands? Did she ask you to get it unlocked?"

Sakichi snorted. "I overheard mom and Aunt Taeko saying they were still having nightmares about getting caught, so I asked them what they were talking about and they told me everything. I did the math and realized it was past the statute of limitations, so I said I'd get the safe opened and we'd split the profit," he said with a dry laugh.

Ensho, still pinning the man in place, shrugged and said, "You're wrong, though."

"What?"

"Your mom set Atsuko's house on fire twenty-five years ago in October. But it's still September right now. It ain't past the statute of limitations."

"Th-That can't be right. Mom said the cherry blossom tree in the garden was in bloom, so it must've been in spring."

"Unfortunately," Kiyotaka interjected, "the cherry blossom tree in Atsuko's garden blooms out of season, in autumn. You made a mistake hearing 'cherry blossoms' and assuming the statute of limitations had expired without doing the proper research."

“Seriously?” Sakichi hung his head.

“Well, even if it had, the safe is nothing but a metal box to you if you don’t know the password.” Kiyotaka looked down at the safe in Komatsu’s hands.

“It sucks, but you’re right. But you guys were just bluffing when you said you solved it, right?”

“No, I do know the answer.” Kiyotaka chuckled.

“What is it, then?” Sakichi glared at him.

“I’m not telling you.”

Atsuko looked relieved to hear that.

“Well then, what are we going to do about Sakichi, Kayoko, and Taeko?” Kiyotaka asked her. “Should we call the police right now?”

A terrified squeak came out of Sakichi’s mouth.

Atsuko gave a small smile and said, “Let’s not call the police right away. I’d like to think it over.”

“The statute of limitations is gonna expire while you’re thinking,” Ensho said with an exasperated shrug.

Atsuko chuckled. “In Gion, there’s nothing more important than connections and trust. Even if the statute of limitations expires, once people know you’ve committed arson, you won’t be able to live here anymore. All that awaits them is social death. So I’m going to take the evidence you gathered and think about what to do.” She giggled and looked at her nephew. “Sakichi.”

The man flinched. “Y-Yes?”

“Hiroki trained at a hotel in Tokyo and then came back to Gion, determined to open a French restaurant. He may have fallen into debt and gone down the wrong path, but he has reflected on his actions and wants to make amends. Would you be able to lend him a hand?” Atsuko asked gently.

Sakichi nodded frantically.

“Please give my regards to Kayoko too.” Atsuko grinned.

Sakichi’s face turned pale.

“Are we done now?” asked Ensho. The instant he let go of Sakichi, the man fled for his life. “Yeesh.”

Komatsu gave a strained smile. “By the way, kiddo, did you really figure out the password?”

“Yes.”

“Can I ask what it was?”

Kiyotaka looked at Atsuko, who nodded in consent. “Taeko Yasui,” he replied.

“What about her?” Komatsu asked.

“That’s the password. Ten letters: T-A-E-K-O-Y-A-S-U-I.”

“How did you get that?” The detective tilted his head.

“The cipher Atsuko’s father prepared was exactly the same as the one Elgar gave to Dora Penny. It remains unsolved to this day. Personally, I think it was part of a conversation that only Elgar and Dora would know,” Kiyotaka said, placing the safe on the table. “Dora Penny was the daughter of Elgar’s friend. Meanwhile, Atsuko’s father addressed this letter to his best friend, Moichi. When you think about it that way, a ten-letter phrase naturally comes to mind, doesn’t it?”

“The name of his friend’s daughter... In other words, Taeko, huh?” Komatsu murmured.

“My father didn’t leave us anything when he died,” said Atsuko. “It felt like he had denied our existence, so I was really happy when I read this letter.” She looked down at the safe.

Kiyotaka carefully rotated the dials on the combination lock with his gloved hands. The moment they spelled “TAEKOYASUI,” the safe clicked open.

Komatsu looked at the treasure inside and murmured, “Whoa.”

Ensho gulped. “This is something, all right.”

“Indeed,” said Kiyotaka. “I knew it would be valuable, but this exceeds my expectations.” He nodded firmly in understanding at the contents of the safe: a large blue diamond that was surely at least twenty carats. It had a certificate of

appraisal with it, albeit a very old one. “So this was the treasure of your father, who was a famed jeweler in Kyoto before the war.”

“Yes,” replied Atsuko. “He didn’t want to let anyone else have it.”

“H-How much is it worth?” Komatsu trembled as he looked up at Kiyotaka.

“A normal diamond of this size would be worth around two hundred million yen. I wonder how much a rare blue diamond would fetch?” Kiyotaka tilted his head.

“No wonder they wanted it so badly they’d set a house on fire.” Ensho chuckled.

“Yes, Taeko and I were shocked when we saw it. It scared us, frankly.” Atsuko picked up the blue diamond and stared at it. “This is the only treasure my father left for me. I was happy, but it didn’t need to be something so grandiose.” She sighed and closed the safe. Then a soft, satisfied expression rose to her face. “Mr. Detective, could I make a request of you?” she asked with a smile.

Komatsu immediately straightened his back and placed a hand on his chest the way Kiyotaka always did. “Sure, whatever you want.”

“I’d like to take this to a gemologist and have it appraised again. Then I want to put it in a safety deposit box at the bank. Could I get a bodyguard to accompany me? I want you to do it,” she said, looking at Ensho.

Ensho looked surprised. He must’ve been expecting her to ask for Kiyotaka. “Me?” he asked.

“Yes, because you look the strongest.”

“Well, I’m honored.” Ensho grinned.

Kiyotaka gave an annoyed shrug.

“Well, be a good bodyguard for Atsuko, Ensho,” said Komatsu.

“Piece of cake.” Ensho stretched.

“Let’s get going, then.” Atsuko rewrapped the safe in cloth and stood up.

“Oh, I forgot to mention,” said Kiyotaka, holding up a hand. “Sorry, but we told our client—the one who suspected his wife of cheating—about your secret

club.”

Atsuko shrugged lightly and said, “Well, you were only doing what was necessary for the job. Do you think he’s going to kick up a fuss?”

“No, I don’t think so. As you said, nothing illegal was happening there. The client even said, ‘I’m surprised, but I’m glad she isn’t having an affair.’”

“That’s good.” Atsuko smiled. “Goodbye, then. Thank you so much.”

Atsuko and Ensho left the office.

*

Once they were out of sight, Komatsu slumped back against the sofa with a loud sigh. “I didn’t think there’d be something *that* crazy in there.”

Kiyotaka nodded. “Considering how valuable it was, they’re lucky that no blood was spilled over it.”

Komatsu’s face stiffened. “That means a lot coming from you, since you’re used to dealing with expensive things. Well, it *was* a diamond, I guess.”

“Yes, and an especially rare type at that. I can’t help but think of the Hope Diamond.”

“What’s that?”

“A blue diamond that is said to have ruined lives and caused deaths.”

“Oh, right.” Komatsu had heard the story before. It was a blue diamond that had been owned by the likes of King Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette. Its owners suffered misfortune one after the other, and it was currently held at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. “So this time, the owner of the blue diamond died in the war and the next owner’s house was set on fire. That’s pretty dramatic, huh? And if Atsuko hadn’t opened that box, she’d still be on good terms with her best friend.”

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka took a sip of his coffee, which had already grown cold. “Come to think of it, that safe is just like Pandora’s box.”

It was a story from Greek mythology. Pandora was told that a certain box must never be opened, but her curiosity got the better of her. Thinking, “It must

contain a wonderful treasure—a small peek can't hurt," she had opened it, instantly releasing an assortment of misfortunes into the world: sorrow, resentment, sickness, death, theft, betrayal, apprehension, conflict, and regret. In that sense, this safe really was a Pandora's box of its own.

"I wonder if Atsuko will be all right." Komatsu frowned.

"Well, money, gems, and art are all a matter of power balance," replied Kiyotaka.

"What do you mean?"

"Some say that treasure chooses its owner, but in the end, it's about whether the owner can win against the treasure's power. If they lose, they'll be crushed by it, but if they don't, they'll obtain a strong partner. Atsuko may have lost to that diamond's power once, but it's possible she can turn the tables in the future."

"Power balance, huh?" Komatsu sipped his coffee. "That's kind of scary."

"It is."

"Pandora's box... When you really think about it, it was a human who opened the box filled with horrors in the first place, so I guess people are scarier than treasure," Komatsu said with a sigh.

Kiyotaka let out a laugh. "Yes, people might be scarier than anything else in the world," he muttered with a faraway look in his eyes.

"Thanks to us, the world is full of disasters now, huh?" Komatsu slumped his shoulders.

Kiyotaka chuckled. "There was one thing left in the bottom of the box, though."

What remained in Pandora's box...was hope.

"I hope Atsuko finds happiness and Hiroki changes his ways," Komatsu murmured to himself.

Kiyotaka nodded. "Me too."

On that quiet afternoon, the Komatsu Detective Agency untangled a series of

connections and solved a case from the past.

Short Story: A Mysterious Time

*

It was a Friday afternoon. Strangely enough, Holmes seemed to be spacing out for once. He was sitting at a desk, resting his chin on his hand and staring into space.

“He must be tired too,” Komatsu murmured quietly, looking at the young man with gentle eyes.

Is “being tired” enough to make him like this? Ensho thought, crossing his arms. *There’s only one reason Holmes would ever act unusually.* “Did something happen with Aoi?” he asked softly.

Holmes slumped over the desk in response.

“Are you all right, kiddo?”

“I’m fine,” Holmes replied, abruptly sitting back up and resting his chin on his hand again.

“Did you get in a fight?” Ensho asked, unsure whether the thought made him excited or nervous. He didn’t like it when the couple’s relationship was going well, but he also didn’t know what he’d do if they broke up.

“Well...Aoi is suddenly going to be visiting New York for three nights over the September holidays. Including the flights, she’ll be gone for five days.”

“Huh?” Ensho squeaked. “That really is sudden. She’s going by herself?”

“Oh, no.” Holmes shook his head. “Do you remember Keiko Fujiwara, the curator who was with us at the Saito residence?”

A while back, there had been an appraisal competition at Rikyu’s grandfather’s house. The curator in question had been a woman in her thirties with wavy hair.

“The vixen, right?” Ensho replied.

Kiyotaka gave a strained laugh in response. “Her mentor is a world-renowned curator named Sally Barrymore, and Sally was recently insulted by a similarly world-renowned curator.”

“Insulted?”

“Apparently, he said, ‘We don’t need women in this world.’”

“Oh god,” said Komatsu, hugging himself. “My wife would be furious if she heard that.”

“Yes, it’s only natural to be angry. Sally was indignant, so she said she wanted to invite ‘female curators in the making’ from around the world to her salon at home for lectures, discussions, and tours of museums in New York.”

“That’s a great idea,” Ensho said without thinking. He couldn’t participate because he was a man, but it still felt appealing to him.

“Yes, it really is. Sally told her apprentices, ‘Bring me budding female curators from your country that you think have potential,’ and Keiko thought of Aoi first.”

“Makes sense.” Ensho folded his arms. He hadn’t yet arrived at the Saito residence when Ukon had tested Aoi, but he’d heard that Aoi had successfully identified the potters behind several pieces of Raku ware. It was only natural that she would come to mind as a promising curator in the making.

“Keiko has connections with Yoshie too, so she invited Aoi via her, and Aoi immediately agreed to go. So Yoshie will be going with her to New York.” Holmes sighed.

“Why do you look so sad? Are you worried about her going abroad?”

“I am, of course, but more importantly, this is happening over the holidays, so I wanted to go too. Obviously I wasn’t going to try to join the women-only lectures and museum tours, though. But then Aoi said, ‘I want to take on the challenge alone this time, without you accompanying me.’” Holmes hung his head, dejected.

Ensho burst out laughing. “Well, that’s ‘cause she doesn’t wanna go with a chaperone.”

“I’m sure you’re right. I feel bad for being an annoying chaperone of a boyfriend.” Holmes groaned and slumped over the desk again.

Ensho continued to laugh at him, but on the inside, he had an idea of what Aoi was really thinking. Now that she’d absorbed all of Holmes’s teachings, she wanted to take on this new challenge by herself if possible. She didn’t stop him from tagging along because he was annoying but because she wanted to see how well she could do without him backing her up. The two of them were lovers, but at the same time, they were teacher and apprentice.

After moping for a while, Holmes lifted his head and said, “Oh, right. I’m going to be teaching Aoi about cloisonné ware again tomorrow. She said she has to submit a report on art her country can be proud of, and she chose cloisonné ware. Would you like to come too?”

Ensho gulped. “I guess I might as well, since you’re offering.” Despite really wanting to go, he couldn’t help but reply indifferently.

“Come at around 2 p.m., then.”

“Got it,” said Ensho, holding up a hand.

*

The next day, Ensho headed to Kura, the antique shop in Teramachi-Sanjo. His heart was pounding with excitement—not just because he was going to see Aoi, but because he was fascinated by Holmes’s lectures on antiques. His desire to be taught by that man outweighed the humiliation and frustration of it.

When he arrived at the store, the Yasuyuki Namikawa flower vase in the display window caught his eye. Like at Kiyomizu Sannenzaka Museum, there was a large magnifying glass placed near the window pane so that viewers could see the exquisite details on the small vase.

“This must be what he was talking about.” *Aoi’s display.*

Ensho stopped to peer at it. The display included written explanations of Yasuyuki Namikawa and his work, making it interesting and easy to understand for first-time viewers. This kind of thoughtfulness could only come from someone like Aoi, who hadn’t originally been involved in the world of art and antiques.

Unfortunately, Sosuke Namikawa was missing from this display. It definitely would've been more interesting to have Kansai's representative cloisonné artist on display as well.

No, that's probably subjective.

Ever since hearing Sosuke Namikawa's story from Holmes, Ensho couldn't help but see himself in the artist. Sosuke Namikawa had been fascinated when he had encountered Yasuyuki Namikawa's work. He'd chosen to pursue the same path, and as he did, he kept looking for ways to surpass his inspirer—just like Ensho had done when he had decided to become an appraiser.

Ensho sighed and stepped back from the display window. He opened the door, feeling a little nervous.

"Oh!" Aoi smiled from behind the counter. "Welcome, Ensho."

As expected, Aoi was in the store. Ensho felt surprisingly calm. He thought he would've been more excited. When they were apart, the Aoi in his mind was always shining brightly, but when they met in person, he realized that although she was cute, she was still just an ordinary girl through and through. She didn't have an intense personality like Holmes either. She wasn't eye-catchingly beautiful, nor did she have an amazing figure. She just looked like a typical good girl, smiling and doing her best to maintain good posture.

Maybe I can't call her a "girl" anymore now that she's a full-fledged adult, though...

The fact that he felt this way made it seem like his feelings for her had calmed down quite a bit. Perhaps his desire had only been a temporary delusion?

"Please have a seat," Aoi said, gesturing to a chair in front of the counter.

Ensho nodded. "Long time no see. Is Holmes in?"

"He's checking the antiques on the second floor right now. I think he'll come down soon. You're joining our study session today, right?"

"Yeah. Thanks for putting up with me."

Ensho sat down, and Aoi immediately headed to the kitchenette in the back. She was probably going to prepare coffee.

“Don’t worry about me,” said Ensho.

“Oh, but the coffee’s ready already, since I thought you’d be coming soon.”

Aoi poured coffee from the glass pot into a porcelain cup and placed it on the counter. Ensho slowly took a sip, taking in the rich aroma.

“Thanks. It tastes good.”

His heart remained calm even as he drank the coffee that had been brewed by Aoi. Maybe he really had moved on from her already.

“I’m glad to hear that. I’ve been trying my best to make it delicious like Holmes does,” Aoi said bashfully.

Dammit, that’s so cute. Ensho found himself in a state of distress. As it turned out, he hadn’t moved on whatsoever. The way she smiled ever so shyly was unbearably sweet. *No, wait, I gotta keep my cool.* He looked up and sipped his coffee again. The fact that it seemed to taste better than before was surely a trick of the mind. He’d laughed at how simple-minded Holmes and Rikyu were, but at this point, he was no better than them.

He regained his composure and looked at Aoi. “I heard you’re going to New York?”

Aoi blushed and nodded. She seemed happy. “It’s actually my first time going abroad...”

“Better be careful, then. You’re in for a world of pain if you act like you’re in Japan.”

She giggled. “Holmes said the same thing.”

Feeling awkward, Ensho changed the subject. “Are you and Holmes always working here on the weekend?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you go on dates or anything?” He randomly asked something he found suspicious.

“Well...not often, I guess. But we do go to museums and art galleries together when the manager is here to watch the store, and early in the morning before

opening time, we go for walks along the river.”

“Museums and walks...”

“It’s fun. And even at the store, he teaches me about antiques when he has time.” Aoi cheerfully clasped her hands in front of her chest. She seemed to enjoy all of the learning opportunities.

The past Ensho wouldn’t have been able to understand, but now he felt like he could relate. He envied her.

But what’s their romantic life like? There’s no way an adult man and woman spend all their time together studying antiques. Do they stay overnight at hotels somewhere?

“Are you and Holmes going on any more trips?”

“No. Holmes is too busy. He can’t even make time for an all-day date...”

“Oh.”

Ensho couldn’t help but feel at ease. He didn’t want the couple to break up, but it also annoyed him when they were too lovey-dovey. At any rate, they probably weren’t sleeping together much. *Sucks to be you, Holmes!*

Then again, it must’ve been hard for that man, being forced to live in abstinence even after they’d already crossed that bridge. *With a girlfriend this cute, it’s practically torture*, Ensho thought, fully aware that his personal bias was coming through in the phrase “a girlfriend this cute.” He thought back to when he first found out that Aoi was Holmes’s girlfriend. At the time, he’d been disappointed by how plain she was. He’d thought she wasn’t good enough for him. Thinking about it gave him mixed feelings now.

Speaking of which, doesn’t Aoi ever worry because her boyfriend is so good-looking? I doubt he’d cheat on her, but he’s gotta be popular. Recalling the way Holmes had interacted with the women when they were investigating the rip-off joint, he rested his chin on his hand and looked at Aoi.

“Hey, Aoi.”

“Yes?”

“What would you do if Holmes cheated on you?” he asked out of curiosity.

But considering how tolerant she was for her age, she'd probably reply with a confident "Holmes would never do that" or "I have faith in him."

"If Holmes...cheated on me?" she murmured. She bit her lip as if she was imagining it actually happening. "I...would really hate that," she said, red-nosed and teary-eyed.

It was like a shot to Ensho's heart.

"Oh, you've arrived," said Holmes, coming down the stairs. He placed a wooden box on the table.

The moment Ensho saw his face, he stood up and shouted, "You'd better not cheat on her, bastard! Don't even think about it!"

Holmes made an irritated frown. "I have no intention whatsoever of cheating. I certainly didn't expect to be told that by *you*, though," he said with a shrug. His expression changed as soon as he saw Aoi's face. "Oh, Aoi, why are there tears in your eyes? Did Ensho do something?" He immediately shot Ensho an angry glare.

Ensho couldn't help but feel pressured. But he refused to give in. He slammed the counter and exclaimed, "No! *You're* the one who made Aoi cry!"

"What?! How on earth did I do that?"

"It's that troublesome appearance of yours!"

"I don't want to hear that from someone as suspicious-looking as you."

"Suspicious?!"

Aoi watched the two men face off in utter confusion for a second before yelling, "Jeez, Holmes, Ensho! Please don't fight over things that don't make sense!"

"Yes, ma'am!" the two said in unison, smiling.

"Huh?" Aoi blinked in surprise. "What, you were just messing with me?" she asked, sounding slightly angry and frustrated.

Dammit, that's cute. Ensho instinctively turned away and noticed that Holmes had done the same, covering his mouth. *Well, we're thinking the same thing.*

“Anyway, did you find it, Holmes?” Aoi asked cheerfully, having regained her composure.

“Yes, I did.” Holmes opened the wooden box on the table and took out a flower vase.

“That’s Sosuke Namikawa...” Ensho murmured softly.

“Yes.” Holmes nodded. “I thought we had one, so I dug it out.”

“No wonder this place is called ‘Kura.’ It really is a storehouse, eh?”

Ensho looked at the Sosuke Namikawa piece—a flower vase decorated with flowers and birds. It was less than twenty centimeters tall with a gentle bulging shape. It depicted a pair of ducks on a white background. Sosuke Namikawa’s unique wireless cloisonné ware really did look soft and realistic.

Aoi brought her face close to the vase, her eyes sparkling. “Yasuyuki Namikawa of the west, and Sosuke Namikawa of the east, right?”

“That’s right,” replied Holmes.

“Can I put this in the display later?” she asked immediately.

For some reason, Ensho found himself feeling happy too.

“Yes, of course.” Holmes also looked delighted.

“Aoi, do you know the story of when the two Namikawas faced off?” asked Ensho.

“Yes.” Aoi nodded. “They fought over whose art would be displayed on the wall at the state guest house.”

“Yeah.”

After going to Kiyomizu Sannenzaka Museum, Ensho had done some research on the two Namikawas. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, when a plan had been proposed to display cloisonné art on the wall of the Hall of Flowers and Birds at the Crown Prince’s Palace (now Akasaka Palace, a state guest house), the Ministry of the Imperial Household had been deciding between Yasuyuki Namikawa and Sosuke Namikawa.

“In the end, they chose Sosuke Namikawa,” Aoi continued, looking down at

the vase.

How did Sosuke Namikawa feel when that happened? He'd won against his role model, mentor in life, and rival.

"But Sosuke Namikawa was chosen because the mood evoked by wireless cloisonné was a better fit for the Hall of Flowers and Birds, not because one of them was more skilled than the other," Holmes added.

Ensho felt ticked off, as if his own victory had been interrupted. He gave Holmes the evil eye, but the man was too busy looking at Aoi to notice the glare aimed his way. Or rather, he may have noticed, but he ignored it. Meanwhile, Aoi was staring intently at Sosuke Namikawa's flower vase.

"Who do you like more, Aoi? The Namikawa of the east or the west?" Ensho asked.

"I love both of them," she replied without hesitation.

That caught Ensho off guard. "If you had to pick one?"

"Hmm." Aoi tilted her head. "I don't know. Both of them are fascinating, and it's hard to tell who's better. If I were judging between them for some purpose, I think I'd choose based on the situation and my mood at the time, like how Sosuke Namikawa's art was chosen for the Hall of Flowers and Birds because it matched the atmosphere there. But I'm not, so there's no need for me to choose between them," she said with a bright smile.

Ensho fell silent, stunned by her words.

"Holmes, can you teach me about Sosuke Namikawa and cloisonné ware?" Aoi asked with sparkling eyes.

"Of course." Holmes smiled and began explaining as usual. "As you may know, in 1986, Sosuke Namikawa was appointed as an Imperial Household Artist for his excellent skills. He and Yasuyuki Namikawa were the only two Imperial Household Artists in the field of cloisonné. From there, they were nicknamed 'Sosuke Namikawa of the east and Yasuyuki Namikawa of the west.'"

Aoi took a notebook out of her pocket and began taking notes. Following her lead, Ensho took out his phone and started typing the main points into a memo

app. As he listened to the lecture, he reflected on what Aoi had said.

“Yeah, she’s right,” he muttered. There was no need to compete. He just had to pursue his own path. Perhaps that was what Sosuke Namikawa had thought when he’d chosen to pursue wireless cloisonné instead of wired. Ensho, too, didn’t need to think about becoming or surpassing Holmes.

When he realized that, his chest suddenly felt a lot lighter. Even though he was studying, he was having fun. This place was stifling yet comfortable. The study session at Kura was truly a mysterious time.

Epilogue

About an hour had passed since Holmes's cloisonné lecture. He and Ensho had left Kura after receiving a call from Komatsu. It sounded like a new request had come in.

Seems like business is booming over there.

I carefully picked up the vase and placed it in the display window along with the explanatory note I'd worked on over the past hour.

"The Two Namikawas: Sosuke Namikawa of the East, Yasuyuki Namikawa of the West. They are the only two cloisonné artists to have become Imperial Household Artists, and they both represent Japan in that field."

Even though I'd already known this information, being taught it by Holmes made it sink in more. Maybe that was why I naturally put more enthusiasm into writing the explanation. I smiled, satisfied with how the display turned out.

While I'm on a roll, it might be a good idea to write the report I have to bring with me to New York.

My heart suddenly began to race at the thought of my trip. Being able to learn from a world-renowned curator was like a dream come true.

I'm not confident in my English, though. I'll have to study hard before I go.

The door chime rang as I was thinking.

"Welcome," I greeted the visitor.

I turned around and was immediately lost for words. Standing there was a gorgeous woman with long black hair, fair skin, and large, bold eyes.

"It's been a while, Aoi."

"Y-Yes, it has," I said with an awkward smile.

Her name was Yilin Jing, and her father was very wealthy. Holmes and I had met this Chinese woman on the luxury overnight train, 7 Stars. At the time,

she'd been accompanied by Shiro Amamiya—now Shiro Kikukawa—so I instinctively felt wary of her, but thinking about it, she herself had been a great person. After all, she'd returned Yoneyama's hanging scrolls to us.

"Sorry to pop in without notice," she said. "Is the Holmes of Kyoto here?"

"Do you have business with him?"

"Yes. I want to ask him to do a job for me," she said with a smile. Her Japanese was as fluent as ever.

"A job?" I looked at the woman before me in bewilderment.

Just when my going to New York had been decided, a Chinese woman came to our store. It felt like a premonition of something big to come, and my heart pounded in anticipation.

As for what happened next...that's a story for next time.

Afterword

Before I knew it, this series reached volume 12. If you include volume 6.5, that makes thirteen books in total.

Thank you for reading. I'm Mai Mochizuki.

Since this was a detective-themed book, I tried to make it hard-boiled, but with Gion as the setting, it ended up more modest and elegant. I suppose you could call it soft-boiled instead. In literature, a story being “hard-boiled” means that the characters have firm wills and tough minds and bodies. In comparison, a soft-boiled egg is tender, fragile, and flavorful—much like the inexperienced Kiyotaka, isn't it? Personally, I like soft-boiled eggs more than hard-boiled eggs, so I'm happy with this. (Sorry, that's just an excuse.)

Gion was the stage this time, so I included cameos of Reito Kamo and Sakuran from another of my series, *Wagaya wa Machi no Ogamiya-san* (published by Kadokawa Bunko). I imagine it won't be a problem for those who don't recognize them, and for those who do, I hope it'll make you grin. Even though *Ogamiya-san* is set in Gion too, strangely enough, the town paints a different picture when I write about it in *Holmes of Kyoto*.

Seeing as Kiyotaka, Ensho, and Komatsu are very different people, I was worried about how they'd fare working in the same detective office, but they turned out to be a good trio, and I enjoyed writing their antics.

As usual, please let me use this space to express my thanks to all of the connections surrounding me and this series. Thank you all so much.

Also, the short story I'm including at the end here was a special one given to those who attended my fall 2018 lecture in Joyo, Kyoto Prefecture. The story takes place in the Yamashiro district of Joyo, which has an even longer history than that of Kyoto City. I thought I'd take this opportunity to publish it in the main series as well. I hope you'll enjoy it.

Mai Mochizuki

Short Story: A Land of Memories

*

“Here we are,” said Holmes, parking the car and smoothly opening the passenger door for me.

Feeling humble, I got out of the car and walked with him towards the ancient-looking stone torii gate. I’d heard that this was the second torii; the first was located further down the slope. In the center of the torii was a sign that said “Mito Shrine.” That’s right: we were at Mito Shrine in Joyo City, Kyoto Prefecture.

The stairs continued past the torii. Surrounded by pine trees on both sides, the path had the quiet, solemn atmosphere of a shrine deep in the mountains.

“This place feels like a different world from the residential area it’s in,” I remarked.

“Yes, it has preserved its natural environment despite being located relatively close to the heart of the city. That’s why it was chosen as one of the ‘200 Natural Wonders of Kyoto.’”

As we climbed the stairs, Holmes taught me that the deities of this shrine were Amaterasu-Sume-Omikami, Takamimusubi-no-Kami, and Wadatsumi Toyotamahime-no-Mikoto. I nodded along, impressed that he always seemed to know everything.

“It also has a long history dating back to the early Heian period,” he added.

“The early Heian period...that’s a long time ago.”

“This area is called Yamashiro, and it has existed since before the Heian relocation of the capital. There are many ancient tombs here.”

As you’d expect, Kyoto was full of history, even outside the capital city. In a way, being outside the capital made it even more likely to have such a long history.

When we reached the top of the stairs, the main shrine building came into view. Perhaps by coincidence, no one else was there. The way it stood in the middle of the forest felt very dignified. We clapped and bowed at the shrine and then straightened our backs, feeling the pleasant autumn breeze.

“There’s still a bit of time before my father’s lecture,” Holmes murmured, looking down at his watch.

The reason we’d come to Joyo City today was to attend the manager’s lecture at Bunka Parc Joyo (BunParc for short), a cultural center. I couldn’t help but worry, knowing how nervous he was about speaking in front of crowds.

“Will he be okay?” I asked.

“Who knows?” Holmes tilted his head.

I coughed at his irresponsible reply. He really was apathetic to his father’s struggles.

“He never agreed to give lectures before, though,” I mused. “I wonder why he accepted this time?”

“I imagine it’s because it’s a memorable place for him.”

“How so?”

“He was in a jazz band in his university days. He played the cello.”

“Oh?” I’d known that the manager could play the cello, but the fact that he’d been in a band was news to me.

“One of his band members went pro and held a concert at BunParc. He invited his band members from university to join him for one song, so my father went on stage as well.”

“Ohh.”

“My father was working at a publishing company at the time. He practiced very hard so that he wouldn’t embarrass himself on stage. On the day of the concert, my mother, who was still his girlfriend at the time, was in the audience. My father’s performance moved her to tears.”

“Wow, that really is a great memory.”

“What happened next is the true ‘great memory,’” said Holmes, holding up his index finger.

“What do you mean?”

“My mother’s tears moved my father in turn, and in his post-performance high, he asked her, ‘Will you marry me?’”

“Wow, that’s amazing!”

“Ueda believes that my father had wanted to propose but couldn’t work up the courage, while my mother was waiting for him to propose. BunParc is a memorable place because it brought my parents together.”

No wonder the manager agreed to give a lecture here. “That’s so wonderful. That means it’s a very important place for me too.”

“Huh?” Holmes looked at me.

“It’s thanks to BunParc that you exist right now,” I said with a smile.

Holmes suddenly placed a hand over his mouth and turned away. “Oh no, you’re saying such adorable things again,” he muttered in his Kyoto accent.

“A-Adorable? You’re overreacting again!”

“It feels adorable to me, therefore it is. Now then, shall we go?” he said casually, extending his hand to me.

“Okay,” I said, blushing and holding his hand.

We left Mito Shrine together.

Just between you and me, the manager’s disorderly lecture really had me worrying, but thanks to the host’s masterful guidance, it ended without incident.

“He should have just played the cello.”

“Don’t say that, Holmes!”

On that day, I heard a wonderful story about the past.

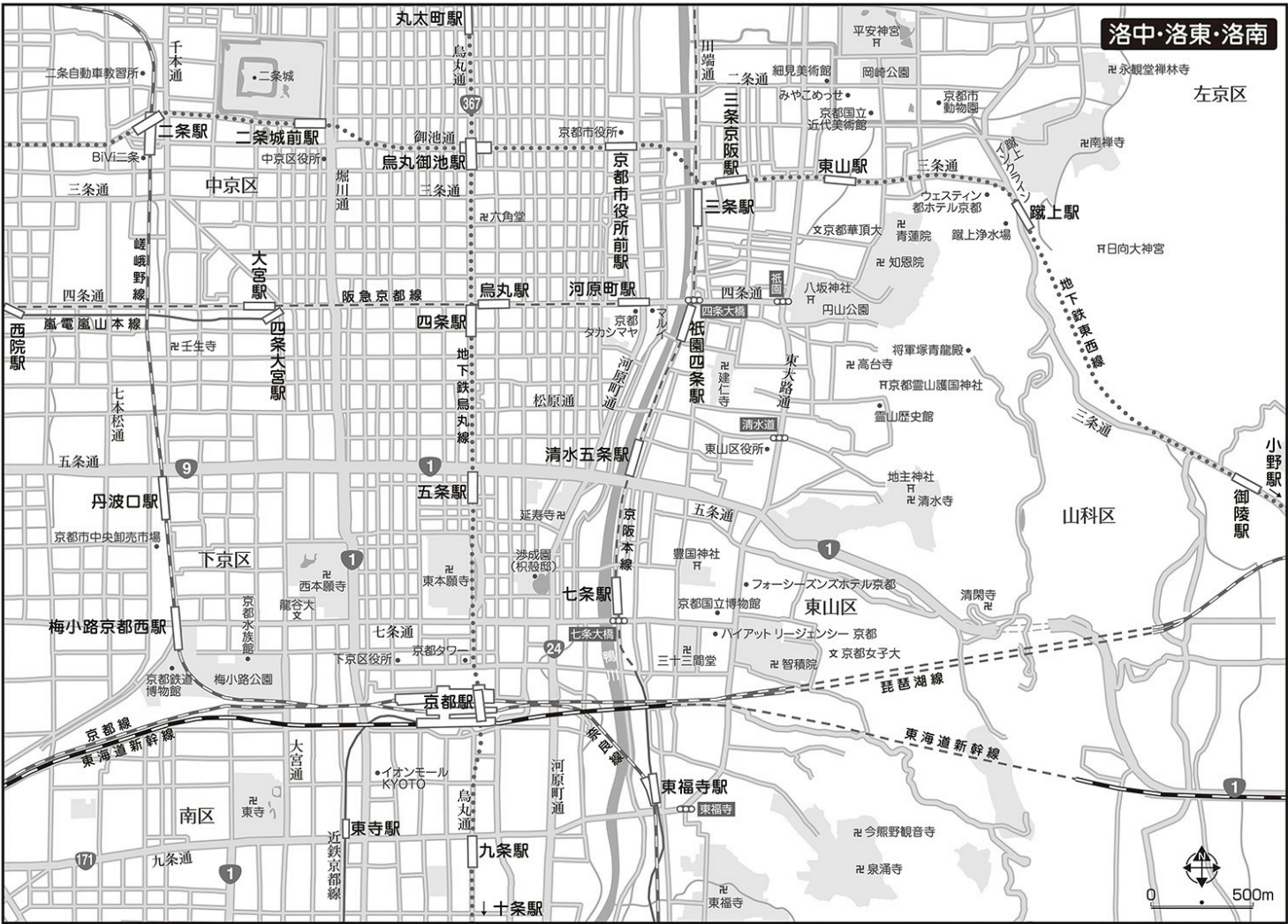


Kiyotaka and Ensho at Hanamikoji Street

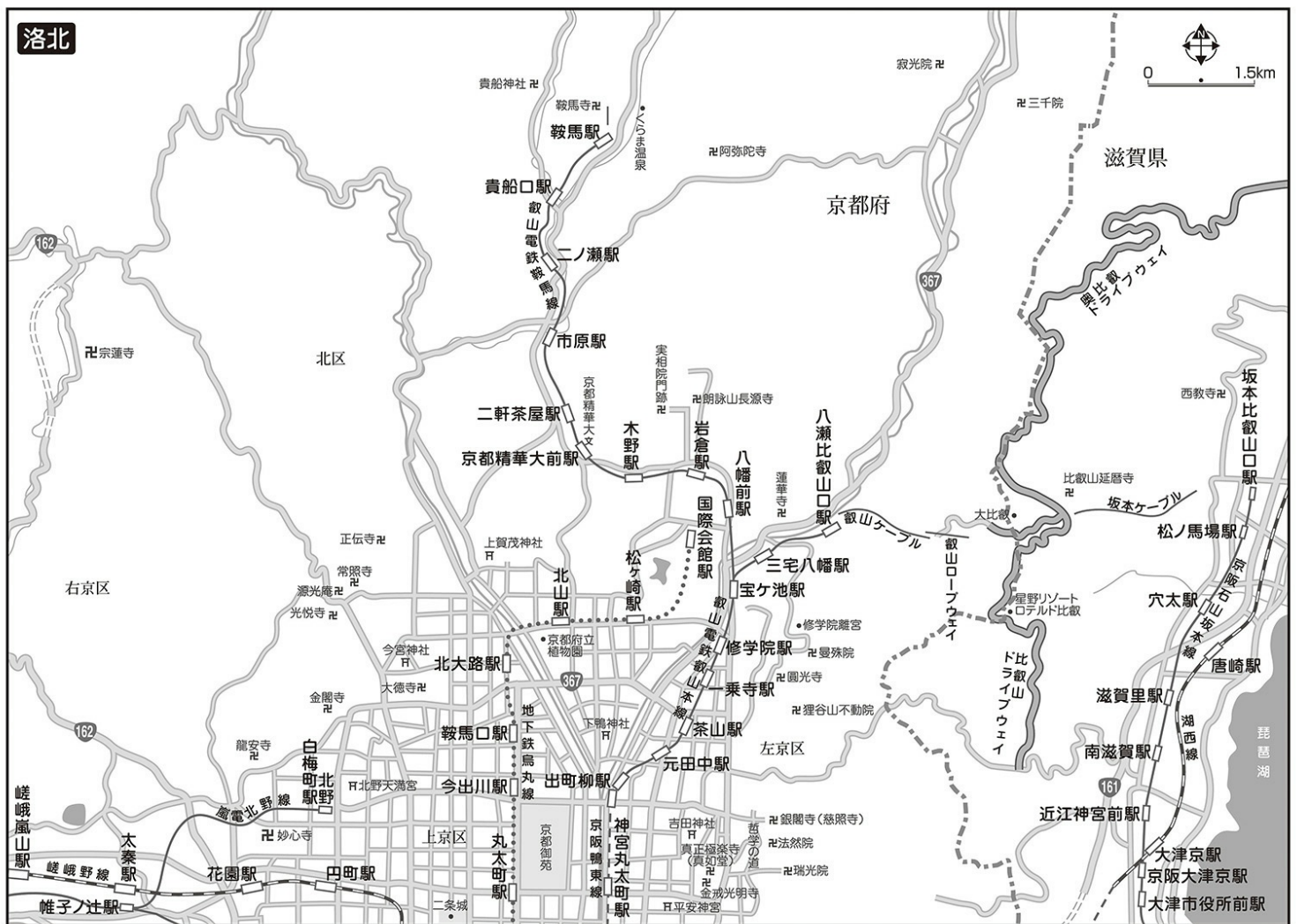


Rikyu at the Komatsu Detective Agency

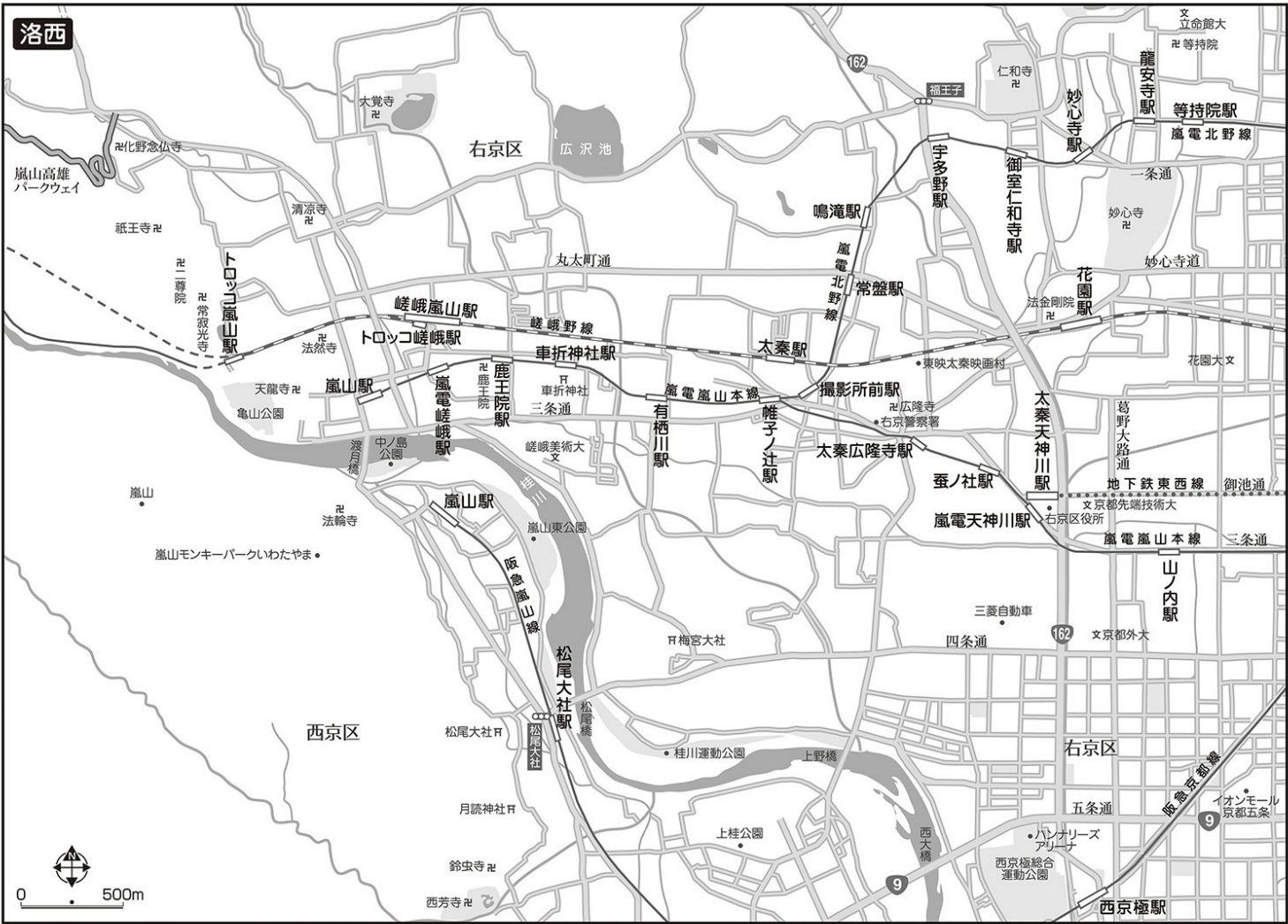
Map of Central, Eastern, and Southern Kyoto



Map of Northern Kyoto



Map of Western Kyoto



Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading volume 12 of *Holmes of Kyoto*! I had a lot of fun translating the mysteries and making sure the phrasing of the hints matched up with the final solutions. I ended up drawing a family tree to help me visualize the character relationships in chapter 3... Anyway, it's time for another round of translation notes!

In chapter 1, when the detective gang returns to the geisha district, the narrator mentions “short bamboo fences” under the townhouses’ lanterns. These fences are probably different from what you imagined—they’re actually slanted or curved. The Japanese word for them is “inuyarai” (meaning “dog fence”), supposedly because they were designed to prevent dogs from peeing on the wooden walls. They also protected the walls from mud, rain, and dust. They can still be found in old neighborhoods of Kyoto today.

At the end of the chapter, Holmes mentions to Aoi that Ayako probably gave Koichi’s daughter the geisha name “Ichiko” because it’s an anagram of “Koichi.” In the original text, Ichiko’s name was actually Honoka, and Holmes made that connection because the “ko” character in Koichi’s name has an alternative pronunciation of “honoka.” It was possible to keep her name as Honoka and use that explanation, but that would’ve made it impossible for English readers to pick up on the clue earlier. Since the character doesn’t appear again beyond this chapter, I chose to change her name to something that English readers could notice and factor in when trying to solve the mystery.



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 12

by Mai Mochizuki

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